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James Baldwin

SONNY'S BLUES

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that as I walked from the subway station to the high school. And at the same time I couldn't doubt it. I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again. A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream. This would always be at a moment when I was remembering some specific thing Sonny had once said or done.

When he was about as old as the boys in my classes his face had been bright and open, there was a lot of copper in it; and he'd had wonderfully direct brown eyes, and great gentleness and privacy. I wondered what he looked like now. He had been picked up, the evening before, in a raid on an apartment downtown, for peddling and using heroin.

I couldn't believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me. I had kept it outside me for a long time. I hadn't wanted to know. I had had suspicions, but I didn't name them, I kept putting them away. I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn't crazy And he'd always been a good

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boy, he hadn't ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem. I didn't want to believe that I'd ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I'd already seen so many others. Yet it had happened and here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could.

I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had horse, he couldn't have been much older than these boys were now. These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone.

When the last bell rang, the last class ended, I let out my breath. It seemed I'd been holding it for all that time. My clothes were wet —I may have looked as though I'd been sitting in a steam bath, all dressed up, all afternoon. I sat alone in the classroom a long time. I listened to the boys outside, downstairs, shouting and cursing and laughing. Their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children. It was mocking and insular, its intent was to denigrate. It was disenchanted, and in this, also, lay the authority of their curses. Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself.

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds.

I stood up and walked over to the window and looked down into the courtyard. It was the beginning of the spring and the sap was rising in the boys. A teacher passed through them every now and again, quickly, as though he or she couldn't wait to get out of that courtyard, to get those boys out of their sight and off their minds. I

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started collecting my stuff. I thought I'd better get home and talk to Isabel.

The courtyard was almost deserted by the time I got downstairs. I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny. I almost called his name. Then I saw that it wasn't Sonny, but somebody we used to know, a boy from around our block. He'd been Sonny's friend. He'd never been mine, having been too young for me, and, anyway, I'd never liked him. And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corner, was always high and raggy. I used to run into him from time to time and he'd often work around to asking me for a quarter or fifty cents. He always had some real good excuse, too, and I always gave it to him, I don't know why.

But now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child. I wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing in the school courtyard.

He sort of shuffled over to me, and he said, "I see you got the papers. So you already know about it."

"You mean about Sonny? Yes, I already know about it. How come they didn't get you?"

He grinned. It made him repulsive and it also brought to mind what he'd looked like as a kid. "I wasn't there. I stay away from them people."

"Good for you." I offered him a cigarette and I watched him through the smoke. "You come all the way down here just to tell me about Sonny?"

"That's right." He was sort of shaking his head and his eyes looked strange, as though they were about to cross. The bright sun deadened his damp dark brown skin and it made his eyes look yellow and showed up the dirt in his conked hair. He smelled funky. I moved a little away from him and I said, "Well, thanks. But I already know about it and I got to get home."

"I'll walk you a little ways," he said. We started walking. There were a couple of kids still loitering in the courtyard and one of them said good night to me and looked strangely at the boy beside me.

"What're you going to do?" he asked me. "I mean, about Sonny?"

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"Look. I haven't seen Sonny for over a year, I'm not sure I'm going to do anything. Anyway, what the hell *can* I do?"

"That's right," he said quickly, "ain't nothing you can do. Can't much help old Sonny no more, I guess."

It was what I was thinking and so it seemed to me he had no right to say it.

"I'm surprised at Sonny, though," he went on—he had a funny way of talking, he looked straight ahead as though he were talking to himself—"I thought Sonny was a smart boy, I thought he was too smart to get hung."

"I guess he thought so too," I said sharply, "and that's how he got hung. And how about you? You're pretty goddamn smart, I bet."

Then he looked directly at me, just for a minute. " I ain't smart," he said. "If I was smart, I'd have reached for a pistol a long time ago."

"Look. Don't tell *me* your sad story, if it was up to me, I'd give you one." Then I felt guilty—guilty, probably, for never having supposed that the poor bastard *had* a story of his own, much less a sad one, and I asked, quickly, "What's going to happen to him now?"

He didn't answer this. He was off by himself some place. "Funny thing," he said, and from his tone we might have been discussing the quickest way to get to Brooklyn, "when I saw the papers this morning, the first thing I asked myself was if I had anything to do with it. I felt sort of responsible."

I began to listen more carefully. The subway station was on the corner, just before us, and I stopped. He stopped, too. We were in front of a bar and he ducked slightly, peering in, but whoever he was looking for didn't seem to be there. The juke box was blasting away with something black and bouncy and I half watched the bar maid as she danced her way from the juke box to her place behind the bar. And I watched her face as she laughingly responded to something someone said to her, still keeping time to the music. When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore.

"I never *give* Sonny nothing," the boy said finally, "but a long time ago I come to school high and Sonny asked me how it felt." He paused, I couldn't bear to watch him, I watched the barmaid,

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and I listened to the music which seemed to be causing the pavement to shake. "I told him it felt great." The music stopped, the barmaid paused and watched the juke box until the music began again. "It did."

All this was carrying me some place I didn't want to go. I certainly didn't want to know how it felt. It filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality.

"What's going to happen to him now?" I asked again.

"They'll send him away some place and they'll try to cure him." He shook his head. "Maybe he'll even think he's kicked the habit. Then they'll let him loose"—he gestured, throwing his cigarette into the gutter. "That's all."

"What do you mean, that's *all?*"

But I knew what he meant.

"I *mean,* that's *all.*" He turned his head and looked at me, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Don't you know what I mean?" he asked, softly.

"How the hell *would* I know what you mean?" I almost whispered it, I don't know why.

"That's right," he said to the air, "how would *he* know what I mean?" He turned toward me again, patient and calm, and yet I somehow felt him shaking, shaking as though he were going to fall apart. I felt that ice in my guts again, the dread I'd felt all afternoon; and again I watched the barmaid, moving about the bar, washing glasses, and singing. "Listen. They'll let him out and then it'll just start all over again. That's what I mean."

"You mean—they'll let him out. And then he'll just start working his way back in again. You mean he'll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?"

"That's right," he said, cheerfully. "*You* see what I mean."

"Tell me," I said at last, "why does he want to die? He must want to die, he's killing himself, why does he want to die?"

He looked at me in surprise. He licked his lips. "He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever."

Then I wanted to ask him—too many things. He could not have answered, or if he had, I could not have borne the answers. I started walking. "Well, I guess it's none of my business."

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"It's going to be rough on old Sonny," he said. We reached the subway station. "This is your station?" he asked. I nodded. I took one step down. "Damn!" he said, suddenly. I looked up at him. He grinned again. "Damn if I didn't leave all my money home. You ain't got a dollar on you, have you? Just for a couple of days, is all."

All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I didn't hate him any more. I felt that in another moment I'd start crying like a child.

"Sure," I said. "Don't sweat." I looked in my wallet and didn't have a dollar, I only had a five. "Here," I said. "That hold you?"

He didn't look at it—he didn't want to look at it. A terrible, closed look came over his face, as though he were keeping the number on the bill a secret from him and me. "Thanks," he said, and now he was dying to see me go. "Don't worry about Sonny. Maybe I'll write him or something."

"Sure," I said. "You do that. So long."

"Be seeing you," he said. I went on down the steps.

And I didn't write Sonny or send him anything for a long time. When I finally did, it was just after my little girl died, he wrote me back a letter which made me feel like a bastard.

Here's what he said:

Dear brother,

You don't know how much I needed to hear from you. I wanted to write you many a time but I dug how much I must have hurt you and so I didn't write. But now I feel like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside.

I can't tell you much about how I got here. I mean I don't know how to tell you. I guess I was afraid of something or I was trying to escape from something and you know I have never been very strong in the head (smile). I'm glad Mama and Daddy are dead and can't see what's happened to their son and I swear if I'd known what I was doing I would never have hurt you so, you and a lot of other fine people who were nice to me and who believed in me.

I don't want you to think it had anything to do with me being a musician. It's more than that. Or maybe less than that. I can't get anything straight in my head down here and I try not to think about

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what's going to happen to me when I get outside again. Sometime I think I'm going to flip and *never* get outside and sometime I think I'll come straight back. I tell you one thing, though, I'd rather blow my brains out than go through this again. But that's what they all say, so they tell me. If I tell you when I'm coming to New York and if you could meet me, I sure would appreciate it. Give my love to Isabel and the kids and I was sure sorry to hear about little Gracie. I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it.

Your brother,
SONNY

Then I kept in constant touch with him and I sent him whatever I could and I went to meet him when he came back to New York. When I saw him many things I thought I had forgotten came flooding back to me. This was because I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside. This life, whatever it was, had made him older and thinner and it had deepened the distant stillness in which he had always moved. He looked very unlike my baby brother. Yet, when he smiled, when we shook hands, the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light.

"How you been keeping?" he asked me.

"All right. And you?"

"Just fine." He was smiling all over his face. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you."

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge. I was remembering, and it made it hard to catch my breath, that I had been there when he was born; and I had heard the first words he had ever spoken. When he started to walk, he walked from our mother straight to me. I caught him just before he fell when he took the first steps he ever took in this world.

"How's Isabel?"

"Just fine. She's dying to see you."

"And the boys?"

"They're fine, too. They're anxious to see their uncle."

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"Oh, come on. You know they don't remember me."

"Are you kidding? Of course they remember you."

He grinned again. We got into a taxi. We had a lot to say to each other, far too much to know how to begin.

As the taxi began to move, I asked, "You still want to go to India?"

He laughed. "You still remember that. Hell, no. This place is Indian enough for me."

"It used to belong to them," I said.

And he laughed again. "They damn sure knew what they were doing when they got rid of it."

Years ago, when he was around fourteen, he'd been all hipped on the idea of going to India. He read books about people sitting on rocks, naked, in all kinds of weather, but mostly bad, naturally, and walking barefoot through hot coals and arriving at wisdom. I used to say that it sounded to me as though they were getting away from wisdom as fast as they could. I think he sort of looked down on me for that.

"Do you mind," he asked, "if we have the driver drive alongside the park? On the west side—I haven't seen the city in so long."

"Of course not," I said. I was afraid that I might sound as though I were humoring him, but I hoped he wouldn't take it that way.

So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood. These streets hadn't changed, though housing projects jutted up out of them now like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea. Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap. It might be said, perhaps, that I had escaped, after all, I was a school teacher; or that Sonny had, he

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hadn't lived in Harlem for years. Yet, as the cab moved uptown through streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny's face, it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind. It's always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches.

We hit 110th Street and started rolling up Lenox Avenue. And I'd known this avenue all my life, but it seemed to me again, as it had seemed on the day I'd first heard about Sonny's trouble, filled with a hidden menace which was its very breath of life.

" We almost there," said Sonny.

"Almost." We were both too nervous to say anything more.

We live in a housing project. It hasn't been up long. A few days after it was up it seemed uninhabitably new, now, of course, it's already rundown. It looks like a parody of the good, clean, faceless life—God knows the people who live in it do their best to make it a parody. The beat-looking grass lying around isn't enough to make their lives green, the hedges will never hold out the streets, and they know it. The big windows fool no one, they aren't big enough to make space out of no space. They don't bother with the windows, they watch the TV screen instead. The playground is most popular with the children who don't play at jacks, or skip rope, or roller skate, or swing, and they can be found in it after dark. We moved in partly because it's not too far from where I teach, and partly for the kids; but it's really just like the houses in which Sonny and I grew up. The same things happen, they'll have the same things to remember. The moment Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape.

Sonny has never been talkative. So I don't know why I was sure he'd be dying to talk to me when supper was over the first night. Everything went fine, the oldest boy remembered him, and the youngest boy liked him, and Sonny had remembered to bring something for each of them; and Isabel, who is really much nicer than I am, more open and giving, had gone to a lot of trouble about dinner and was genuinely glad to see him. And she's always been able to tease Sonny in a way that I haven't. It was nice to see her face so vivid again and to hear her laugh and watch her make Sonny

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laugh. She wasn't, or, anyway, she didn't seem to be, at all uneasy or embarrassed. She chatted as though there were no subject which had to be avoided and she got Sonny past his first, faint stiffness. And thank God she was there, for I was filled with that icy dread again. Everything I did seemed awkward to me, and everything I said sounded freighted with hidden meaning. I was trying to remember everything I'd heard about dope addiction and I couldn't help watching Sonny for signs. I wasn't doing it out of malice. I was trying to find out something about my brother. I was dying to hear him tell me he was safe.

"Safe!" my father grunted, whenever Mama suggested trying to move to a neighborhood which might be safer for children. "Safe, hell! Ain't no place safe for kids, nor nobody."

He always went on like this, but he wasn't, ever, really as bad as he sounded, not even on weekends, when he got drunk. As a matter of fact, he was always on the lookout for "something a little better," but he died before he found it. He died suddenly, during a drunken weekend in the middle of the war, when Sonny was fifteen. He and Sonny hadn't ever got on too well. And this was partly because Sonny was the apple of his father's eye. It was because he loved Sonny so much and was frightened for him, that he was always fighting with him. It doesn't do any good to fight with Sonny. Sonny just moves back, inside himself, where he can't be reached. But the principal reason that they never hit it off is that they were so much alike. Daddy was big and rough and loud-talking, just the opposite of Sonny, but they both had—that same privacy.

Mama tried to tell me something about this, just after Daddy died. I was home on leave from the army.

This was the last time I ever saw my mother alive. Just the same, this picture gets all mixed up in my mind with pictures I had of her when she was younger. The way I always see her is the way she used to be on a Sunday afternoon, say, when the old folks were talking after the big Sunday dinner. I always see her wearing pale blue. She'd be sitting on the sofa. And my father would be sitting in the easy chair, not far from her. And the living room would be full of church folks and relatives. There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the window-

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panes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father's eyes are closed. Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk.

But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending. In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won't talk any more that day. And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk any more because if he knows too much about what's happened to *them,* he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to *him.*

The last time I talked to my mother, I remember I was restless. I wanted to get out and see Isabel. We weren't married then and we had a lot to straighten out between us.

There Mama sat, in black, by the window. She was humming an old church song, *Lord, you brought me from a long ways off.* Sonny was out somewhere. Mama kept watching the streets.

" I don't know," she said, "if I'll ever see you again, after you go off from here. But I hope you'll remember the things I tried to teach you."

"Don't talk like that," I said, and smiled. "You'll be here a long time yet."

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She smiled, too, but she said nothing. She was quiet for a long time. And I said, "Mama, don't you worry about nothing. I'll be writing all the time, and you be getting the checks. . . ."

"I want to talk to you about your brother," she said, suddenly. "If anything happens to me he ain't going to have nobody to look out for him."

"Mama," I said, "ain't nothing going to happen to you *or* Sonny. Sonny's all right. He's a good boy and he's got good sense."

"It ain't a question of his being a good boy," Mama said, "nor of his having good sense. It ain't only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under." She stopped, looking at me. "Your Daddy once had a brother," she said, and she smiled in a way that made me feel she was in pain. "You didn't never know that, did you?"

"No," I said, "I never knew that," and I watched her face.

"Oh, yes," she said, "your Daddy had a brother." She looked out of the window again. "I know you never saw your Daddy cry. But *I* did—many a time, through all these years."

I asked her, "What happened to his brother? How come nobody's ever talked about him?"

This was the first time I ever saw my mother look old.

"His brother got killed," she said, "when he was just a little younger than you are now. I knew him. He was a fine boy. He was maybe a little full of the devil, but he didn't mean nobody no harm."

Then she stopped and the room was silent, exactly as it had sometimes been on those Sunday afternoons. Mama kept looking out into the streets.

"He used to have a job in the mill," she said, "and, like all young folks, he just liked to perform on Saturday nights. Saturday nights, him and your father would drift around to different places, go to dances and things like that, or just sit around with people they knew, and your father's brother would sing, he had a fine voice, and play along with himself on his guitar. Well, this particular Saturday night, him and your father was coming home from some place, and they were both a little drunk and there was a moon that night, it was bright like day. Your father's brother was feeling kind of good, and he was whistling to himself, and he had his guitar slung over his shoulder. They was coming down a hill and beneath them was a road that turned off from the highway. Well, your father's

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brother, being always kind of frisky, decided to run down this hill, and he did, with that guitar banging and clanging behind him, and he ran across the road, and he was making water behind a tree. And your father was sort of amused at him and he was still coming down the hill, kind of slow. Then he heard a car motor and that same minute his brother stepped from behind the tree, into the road, in the moonlight. And he started to cross the road. And your father started to run down the hill, he says he don't know why. This car was full of white men. They was all drunk, and when they seen your father's brother they let out a great whoop and holler and they aimed the car straight at him. They was having fun, they just wanted to scare him, the way they do sometimes, you know. But they was drunk. And I guess the boy, being drunk, too, and scared, kind of lost his head. By the time he jumped it was too late. Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of that guitar when it give, and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day. And, time your father got down the hill, his brother weren't nothing but blood and pulp."

Tears were gleaming on my mother's face. There wasn't anything I could say.

"He never mentioned it," she said, "because I never let him mention it before you children. Your Daddy was like a crazy man that night and for many a night thereafter. He says he never in his life seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away. Weren't nothing, weren't nobody on that road, just your Daddy and his brother and that busted guitar. Oh, yes. Your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren't sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother."

She stopped and took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes and looked at me.

"I ain't telling you all this," she said, "to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I'm telling you this because you got a brother. And the world ain't changed."

I guess I didn't want to believe this. I guess she saw this in my face. She turned away from me, toward the window again, searching those streets.

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"But I praise my Redeemer," she said at last, "that He called your Daddy home before me. I ain't saying it to throw no flowers at myself, but, I declare, it keeps me from feeling too cast down to know I helped your father get safely through this world. Your father always acted like he was the roughest, strongest man on earth. And everybody took him to be like that. But if he hadn't had *me* there—to see his tears!"

She was crying again. Still, I couldn't move. I said, "Lord, Lord, Mama, I didn't know it was like that."

"Oh, honey," she said, "there's a lot that you don't know. But you are going to find it out." She stood up from the window and came over to me. "You got to hold on to your brother," she said, "and don't let him fall, no matter what it looks like is happening to him and no matter how evil you gets with him. You going to be evil with him many a time. But don't you forget what I told you, you hear?"

"I won't forget," I said. "Don't you worry, I won't forget. I won't let nothing happen to Sonny."

My mother smiled as though she were amused at something she saw in my face. Then, "You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you's *there*."

Two days later I was married, and then I was gone. And I had a lot of things on my mind and I pretty well forgot my promise to Mama until I got shipped home on a special furlough for her funeral.

And, after the funeral, with just Sonny and me alone in the empty kitchen, I tried to find out something about him.

"What do you want to do?" I asked him.

"I'm going to be a musician," he said.

For he had graduated, in the time I had been away, from dancing to the juke box to finding out who was playing what, and what they were doing with it, and he had bought himself a set of drums.

"You mean, you want to be a drummer?" I somehow had the feeling that being a drummer might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny.

"I don't think," he said, looking at me very gravely, "that I'll ever be a good drummer. But I think I can play a piano."

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I frowned. I'd never played the role of the older brother quite so seriously before, had scarcely ever, in fact, *asked* Sonny a damn thing. I sensed myself in the presence of something I didn't really know how to handle, didn't understand. So I made my frown a little deeper as I asked: "What kind of musician do you want to be?"

He grinned. "How many kinds do you think there are?"

"Be *serious,*" I said.

He laughed, throwing his head back, and then looked at me. "I *am* serious."

"Well, then, for Christ's sake, stop kidding around and answer a serious question. I mean, do you want to be a concert pianist, you want to play classical music and all that, or—or what?" Long before I finished he was laughing again. "For Christ's *sake,* Sonny!"

He sobered, but with difficulty. "I'm sorry. But you sound so—*scared!*" and he was off again.

"Well, you may think it's funny now, baby, but it's not going to be so funny when you have to make your living at it, let me tell you *that.*" I was furious because I knew he was laughing at me and I didn't know why.

"No," he said, very sober now, and afraid, perhaps, that he'd hurt me, "I don't want to be a classical pianist. That isn't what interests me. I mean"—he paused, looking hard at me, as though his eyes would help me to understand, and then gestured helplessly, as though perhaps his hand would help—"I mean, I'll have a lot of studying to do, and I'll have to study *everything,* but, I mean, I want to play *with*—jazz musicians." He stopped. "I want to play jazz," he said.

Well, the word had never before sounded as heavy, as real, as it sounded that afternoon in Sonny's mouth. I just looked at him and I was probably frowning a real frown by this time. I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around night clubs, clowning around on band-stands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him, somehow. I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "good-time people."

"Are you *serious?*"

"Hell, *yes,* I'm serious."

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He looked more helpless than ever, and annoyed, and deeply hurt.

I suggested, helpfully: "You mean—like Louis Armstrong?"

His face closed as though I'd struck him. "No. I'm not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap."

"Well, look, Sonny, I'm sorry, don't get mad. I just don't altogether get it, that's all. Name somebody—you know, a jazz musician you admire."

"Bird."

"Who?"

"Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?"

I lit a cigarette. I was surprised and then a little amused to discover that I was trembling. "I've been out of touch," I said. "You'll have to be patient with me. Now. Who's this Parker character?"

"He's just one of the greatest jazz musicians alive," said Sonny, sullenly, his hands in his pockets, his back to me. "Maybe *the* greatest," he added, bitterly, "that's probably why *you* never heard of him."

"All right," I said, "I'm ignorant. I'm sorry. I'll go out and buy all the cat's records right away, all right?"

"It don't," said Sonny, with dignity, "make any difference to me. I don't care what you listen to. Don't do me no favors."

I was beginning to realize that I'd never seen him so upset before. With another part of my mind I was thinking that this would probably turn out to be one of those things kids go through and that I shouldn't make it seem important by pushing it too hard. Still, I didn't think it would do any harm to ask: "Doesn't all this take a lot of time? Can you make a living at it?"

He turned back to me and half leaned, half sat, on the kitchen table. "Everything takes time," he said, "and—well, yes, sure, I can make a living at it. But what I don't seem to be able to make you understand is that it's the only thing I want to do."

"Well, Sonny," I said, gently, "you know people can't always do exactly what they *want* to do—"

"*No,* I don't know that," said Sonny, surprising me. "I think people *ought* to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?"

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"You getting to be a big boy," I said desperately, "it's time you started thinking about your future."

"I'm thinking about my future," said Sonny, grimly. "I think about it all the time."

I gave up. I decided, if he didn't change his mind, that we could always talk about it later. "In the meantime," I said, "you got to finish school." We had already decided that he'd have to move in with Isabel and her folks. I knew this wasn't the ideal arrangement because Isabel's folks are inclined to be dicty and they hadn't especially wanted Isabel to marry me. But I didn't know what else to do. "And we have to get you fixed up at Isabel's."

There was a long silence. He moved from the kitchen table to the window. "That's a terrible idea. You know it yourself."

"Do you have a *better* idea?"

He just walked up and down the kitchen for a minute. He was as tall as I was. He had started to shave. I suddenly had the feeling that I didn't know him at all.

He stopped at the kitchen table and picked up my cigarettes. Looking at me with a kind of mocking, amused defiance, he put one between his lips. "You mind?"

"You smoking already?"

He lit the cigarette and nodded, watching me through the smoke. "I just wanted to see if I'd have the courage to smoke in front of you." He grinned and blew a great cloud of smoke to the ceiling. "It was easy." He looked at my face. "Come on, now. I bet you was smoking at my age, tell the truth."

I didn't say anything but the truth was on my face, and he laughed. But now there was something very strained in his laugh. "Sure. And I bet that ain't all you was doing."

He was frightening me a little. "Cut the crap," I said. " We already decided that you was going to go and live at Isabel's. Now what's got into you all of a sudden?"

"*You* decided it," he pointed out. "*I* didn't decide nothing." He stopped in front of me, leaning against the stove, arms loosely folded. "Look, brother. I don't want to stay in Harlem no more, I really don't." He was very earnest. He looked at me, then over toward the kitchen window. There was something in his eyes I'd never seen before, some thoughtfulness, some worry all his own. He rubbed the muscle of one arm. "It's time I was getting out of here."

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"Where do you want to *go,* Sonny?"

"I want to join the army. Or the navy, I don't care. If I say I'm old enough, they'll believe me."

Then I got mad. It was because I was so scared. "You must be crazy. You goddamn fool, what the hell do you want to go and join the *army* for?"

"I just told you. To get out of Harlem."

"Sonny, you haven't even finished *school.* And if you really want to be a musician, how do you expect to study if you're in the *army?*"

He looked at me, trapped, and in anguish. "There's ways. I might be able to work out some kind of deal. Anyway, I'll have the G.I. Bill when I come out."

"*If* you come out." We stared at each other. "Sonny, please. Be reasonable. I know the setup is far from perfect. But we got to do the best we can."

"I ain't learning nothing in school," he said. "Even when I go." He turned away from me and opened the window and threw his cigarette out into the narrow alley. I watched his back. "At least, I ain't learning nothing you'd want me to learn." He slammed the window so hard I thought the glass would fly out, and turned back to me. "And I'm sick of the stink of these garbage cans!"

"Sonny," I said, "I know how you feel. But if you don't finish school now, you're going to be sorry later that you didn't." I grabbed him by the shoulders. "And you only got another year. It ain't so bad. And I'll come back and I swear I'll help you do *whatever* you want to do. Just try to put up with it till I come back. Will you please do that? For me?"

He didn't answer and he wouldn't look at me.

"Sonny. You hear me?"

He pulled away. "I hear you. But you never hear anything *I* say."

I didn't know what to say to that. He looked out of the window and then back at me. "OK," he said, and sighed. "I'll try."

Then I said, trying to cheer him up a little, "They got a piano at Isabel's. You can practice on it."

And as a matter of fact, it did cheer him up for a minute. "That's right," he said to himself. "I forgot that." His face relaxed a little.

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But the worry, the thoughtfulness, played on it still, the way shadows play on a face which is staring into the fire.

But I thought I'd never hear the end of that piano. At first, Isabel would write me, saying how nice it was that Sonny was so serious about his music and how, as soon as he came in from school, or wherever he had been when he was supposed to be at school, he went straight to that piano and stayed there until suppertime. And, after supper, he went back to that piano and stayed there until everybody went to bed. He was at that piano all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Then he bought a record player and started playing records. He'd play one record over and over again, all day long sometimes, and he'd improvise along with it on the piano. Or he'd play one section of the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he'd do it on the piano. Then back to the record. Then back to the piano.

Well, I really don't know how they stood it. Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them—naturally. They began, in a way, to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all. They fed him and he ate, he washed himself, he walked in and out of their door; he certainly wasn't nasty or unpleasant or rude, Sonny isn't any of those things; but it was as though he were all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own; and there wasn't any way to reach him.

At the same time, he wasn't really a man yet, he was still a child, and they had to watch out for him in all kinds of ways. They certainly couldn't throw him out. Neither did they dare to make a great scene about that piano because even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away, that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life.

But he hadn't been going to school. One day a letter came from the school board and Isabel's mother got it—there had, apparently, been other letters but Sonny had torn them up. This day, when Sonny

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came in, Isabel's mother showed him the letter and asked where he'd been spending his time. And she finally got it out of him that he'd been down in Greenwich Village, with musicians and other characters, in a white girl's apartment. And this scared her and she started to scream at him and what came up, once she began—though she denies it to this day—was what sacrifices they were making to give Sonny a decent home and how little he appreciated it.

Sonny didn't play the piano that day. By evening, Isabel's mother had calmed down but then there was the old man to deal with, and Isabel herself. Isabel says she did her best to be calm but she broke down and started crying. She says she just watched Sonny's face. She could tell, by watching him, what was happening with him. And what was happening was that they penetrated his cloud, they had reached him. Even if their fingers had been a thousand times more gentle than human fingers ever are, he could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were spitting on that nakedness. For he also had to see that his presence, that music, which was life or death to him, had been torture for them and that they had endured it, not at all for his sake, but only for mine. And Sonny couldn't take that. He can take it a little better today than he could then but he's still not very good at it and, frankly, I don't know anybody who is.

The silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began. One morning, before she went to work, Isabel was in his room for something and she suddenly realized that all of his records were gone. And she knew for certain that he was gone. And he was. He went as far as the navy would carry him. He finally sent me a postcard from some place in Greece and that was the first I knew that Sonny was still alive. I didn't see him any more until we were both back in New York and the war had long been over.

He was a man by then, of course, but I wasn't willing to see it. He came by the house from time to time, but we fought almost every time we met. I didn't like the way he carried himself, loose and dreamlike all the time, and I didn't like his friends, and his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that weird and disordered.

Then we had a fight, a pretty awful fight, and I didn't see him

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for months. By and by I looked him up, where he was living, in a furnished room in the Village, and I tried to make it up. But there were lots of other people in the room and Sonny just lay on his bed, and he wouldn't come downstairs with me, and he treated these other people as though they were his family and I weren't. So I got mad and then he got mad, and then I told him that he might just as well be dead as live the way he was living. Then he stood up and he told me not to worry about him any more in life, that he *was* dead as far as I was concerned. Then he pushed me to the door and the other people looked on as though nothing were happening, and he slammed the door behind me. I stood in the hallway, staring at the door. I heard somebody laugh in the room and then the tears came to my eyes. I started down the steps, whistling to keep from crying, I kept whistling to myself, *You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days.*

I read about Sonny's trouble in the spring. Little Grace died in the fall. She was a beautiful little girl. But she only lived a little over two years. She died of polio and she suffered. She had a slight fever for a couple of days, but it didn't seem like anything and we just kept her in bed. And we would certainly have called the doctor, but the fever dropped, she seemed to be all right. So we thought it had just been a cold. Then, one day, she was up, playing, Isabel was in the kitchen fixing lunch for the two boys when they'd come in from school, and she heard Grace fall down in the living room. When you have a lot of children you don't always start running when one of them falls, unless they start screaming or something. And, this time, Grace was quiet. Yet, Isabel says that when she heard that *thump* and then that silence, something happened in her to make her afraid. And she ran to the living room and there was little Grace on the floor, all twisted up, and the reason she hadn't screamed was that she couldn't get her breath. And when she did scream, it was the worst sound, Isabel says, that she'd ever heard in all her life, and she still hears it sometimes in her dreams. Isabel will sometimes wake me up with a low, moaning, strangled sound and I have to be quick to awaken her and hold her to me and where Isabel is weeping against me seems a mortal wound.

I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace

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was buried. I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real.

One Saturday afternoon, when Sonny had been living with us, or, anyway, been in our house, for nearly two weeks, I found myself wandering aimlessly about the living room, drinking from a can of beer, and trying to work up the courage to search Sonny's room. He was out, he was usually out whenever I was home, and Isabel had taken the children to see their grandparents. Suddenly I was standing still in front of the living room window, watching Seventh Avenue. The idea of searching Sonny's room made me still. I scarcely dared to admit to myself what I'd be searching for. I didn't know what I'd do if I found it. Or if I didn't.

On the sidewalk across from me, near the entrance to a barbecue joint, some people were holding an old-fashioned revival meeting. The barbecue cook, wearing a dirty white apron, his conked hair reddish and metallic in the pale sun, and a cigarette between his lips, stood in the doorway, watching them. Kids and older people paused in their errands and stood there, along with some older men and a couple of very tough-looking women who watched everything that happened on the avenue, as though they owned it, or were maybe owned by it. Well, they were watching this, too. The revival was being carried on by three sisters in black, and a brother. All they had were their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine. The brother was testifying and while he testified two of the sisters stood together, seeming to say, Amen, and the third sister walked around with the tambourine outstretched and a couple of people dropped coins into it. Then the brother's testimony ended and the sister who had been taking up the collection dumped the coins into her palm and transferred them to the pocket of her long black robe. Then she raised both hands, striking the tambourine against the air, and then against one hand, and she started to sing. And the two other sisters and the brother joined in.

It was strange, suddenly, to watch, though I had been seeing these street meetings all my life. So, of course, had everybody else down there. Yet, they paused and watched and listened and I stood still at the window. *"Tis the old ship of Zion,"* they sang, and the sister with the tambourine kept a steady, jangling beat, *"it has rescued*

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many a thousand!" Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the way of rescue work being done around them. Neither did they especially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about them, knew where they lived, and how. The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last. The barbecue cook half shook his head and smiled, and dropped his cigarette and disappeared into his joint. A man fumbled in his pockets for change and stood holding it in his hand impatiently, as though he had just remembered a pressing appointment further up the avenue. He looked furious. Then I saw Sonny, standing on the edge of the crowd. He was carrying a wide, flat notebook with a green cover, and it made him look, from where I was standing, almost like a schoolboy. The coppery sun brought out the copper in his skin, he was very faintly smiling, standing very still. Then the singing stopped, the tambourine turned into a collection plate again. The furious man dropped in his coins and vanished, so did a couple of the women, and Sonny dropped some change in the plate, looking directly at the woman with a little smile. He started across the avenue, toward the house. He has a slow, loping walk, something like the way Harlem hipsters walk, only he's imposed on this his own half-beat. I had never really noticed it before.

I stayed at the window, both relieved and apprehensive. As Sonny disappeared from my sight, they began singing again. And they were still singing when his key turned in the lock.

"Hey," he said.

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"Hey, yourself. You want some beer?"

"No. Well, maybe." But he came up to the window and stood beside me, looking out. "What a warm voice," he said.

They were singing *If I could only hear my mother pray again!*

"Yes," I said, "and she can sure beat that tambourine."

"But what a terrible song," he said, and laughed. He dropped his notebook on the sofa and disappeared into the kitchen. "Where's Isabel and the kids?"

"I think they went to see their grandparents. You hungry?"

"No." He came back into the living room with his can of beer. "You want to come some place with me tonight?"

I sensed, I don't know how, that I couldn't possibly say No. "Sure. Where?"

He sat down on the sofa and picked up his notebook and started leafing through it. "I'm going to sit in with some fellows in a joint in the Village."

"You mean, you're going to play, tonight?"

"That's right." He took a swallow of his beer and moved back to the window. He gave me a sidelong look. "If you can stand it."

"I'll try," I said.

He smiled to himself and we both watched as the meeting across the way broke up. The three sisters and the brother, heads bowed, were singing *God be with you till we meet again.* The faces around them were very quiet. Then the song ended. The small crowd dispersed. We watched the three woman and the lone man walk slowly up the avenue.

"When she was singing before," said Sonny, abruptly, "her voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes —when it's in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And—and sure." He sipped his beer, very deliberately not looking at me. I watched his face. "It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling."

"Do you?" I sat down slowly in the easy chair.

"Sometimes." He went to the sofa and picked up his notebook again. "Some people do."

"In order," I asked, "to play?" And my voice was very ugly, full of contempt and anger.

"Well"—he looked at me with great, troubled eyes, as though, in

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fact, he hoped his eyes would tell me things he could never otherwise say—"they *think* so. And *if* they think so—!"

"And what do *you* think?" I asked.

He sat on the sofa and put his can of beer on the floor. "I don't know," he said, and I couldn't be sure if he were answering my question or pursuing his thoughts. His face didn't tell me. "It's not so much to *play*. It's to *stand* it, to be able to make it at all. On any level." He frowned and smiled: "In order to keep from shaking to pieces."

"But these friends of yours," I said, "they seem to shake themselves to pieces pretty goddamn fast."

"Maybe." He played with the notebook. And something told me that I should curb my tongue, that Sonny was doing his best to talk, that I should listen. "But of course you only know the ones that've gone to pieces. Some don't—or at least they haven't *yet* and that's just about all *any* of us can say." He paused. "And then there are some who just live, really, in hell, and they know it and they see what's happening and they go right on. I don't know." He sighed, dropped the notebook, folded his arms. "Some guys, you can tell from the way they play, they on something *all* the time. And you can see that, well, it makes something real for them. But of course," he picked up his beer from the floor and sipped it and put the can down again, "they *want* to, too, you've got to see that. Even some of them that say they don't—*some,* not all."

"And what about you?" I asked—I couldn't help it. "What about you? Do *you* want to?"

He stood up and walked to the window and remained silent for a long time. Then he sighed. "Me," he said. Then: "While I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that. It's *repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much."

I said: "But there's no way not to suffer—is there, Sonny?"

"I believe not," he said, and smiled, "but that's never stopped anyone from trying." He looked at me. "Has it?" I realized, with this mocking look, that there stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence—so long!—when he had needed human speech to help him. He turned back

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to the window. "No, there's no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it, and to make it seem—well, like *you*. Like you did something, all right, and now you're suffering for it. You know?" I said nothing. "Well you know," he said, impatiently, "why *do* people suffer? Maybe it's better to do something to give it a reason, *any* reason."

"But we just agreed," I said, "that there's no way not to suffer. Isn't it better, then, just to—take it?"

"But nobody just takes it," Sonny cried, "that's what I'm telling you! *Everybody* tries not to. You're just hung up on the *way* some people try—it's not *your* way!"

The hair on my face began to itch, my face felt wet. "That's not true," I said, "that's not true. I don't give a damn what other people do, I don't even care how they suffer. I just care how *you* suffer." And he looked at me. "Please believe me," I said, "I don't want to see you—die—trying not to suffer."

"I won't," he said, flatly, "die trying not to suffer. At least, not any faster than anybody else."

"But there's no need," I said, trying to laugh, "is there? in killing yourself."

I wanted to say more, but I couldn't. I wanted to talk about will power and how life could be—well, beautiful. I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? or, rather, wasn't that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded—empty words and lies.

So I made the promise to myself and prayed that I would keep it.

"It's terrible sometimes, inside," he said, "that's what's the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out—that storm inside. You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen."

And then he walked away from the window and sat on the sofa again, as though all the wind had suddenly been knocked out of him. "Sometimes you'll do *anything* to play, even cut your mother's throat." He laughed and looked at me. "Or your brother's." Then he sobered. "Or your own." Then: "Don't worry. I'm all right

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now and I think I'll *be* all right. But I can't forget—where I've been. I don't mean just the physical place I've been, I mean where I've *been*. And *what* I've been."

"What have you been, Sonny?" I asked.

He smiled—but sat sideways on the sofa, his elbow resting on the back, his fingers playing with his mouth and chin, not looking at me. "I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be. Didn't know anybody could be." He stopped, looking inward, looking helplessly young, looking old. "I'm not talking about it now because I feel *guilty* or anything like that— maybe it would be better if I did, I don't know. Anyway, I can't really talk about it. Not to you, not to anybody," and now he turned and faced me. "Sometimes, you know, and it was actually when I was most *out* of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was *with* it, really, and I could play or I didn't really have to *play,* it just came out of me, it was there. And I don't know how I played, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things, those times, sometimes, to people. Or it wasn't that I *did* anything to them—it was that they weren't real." He picked up the beer can; it was empty; he rolled it between his palms: "And other times—well, I needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to *listen*—and I couldn't find it, and I—went crazy, I did terrible things to *me,* I was terrible *for* me." He began pressing the beer can between his hands, I watched the metal begin to give. It glittered, as he played with it, like a knife, and I was afraid he would cut himself, but I said nothing. "Oh well. I can never tell you. I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? *my* stink, and I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet, all the same, I knew that everything I was doing was just locking me in with it. And I didn't know," he paused, still flattening the beer can, "I didn't know, I still *don't* know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that *that* was what I'd been trying to do—and—who can stand it?" and he abruptly dropped the ruined beer can, looking at me with a small, still smile, and then rose, walking to the window as though it were the lodestone rock. I watched his face, he watched the avenue. "I couldn't tell you when Mama died—but the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so bad was to get away from

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drugs. And then, when I ran away, that's what I was running from —really. When I came back, nothing had changed, *I* hadn't changed, I was just—older." And he stopped, drumming with his fingers on the windowpane. The sun had vanished, soon darkness would fall. I watched his face. "It can come again," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. Then he turned to me. "It can come again," he repeated. "I just want you to know that."

"All right," I said, at last. "So it can come again, All right."

He smiled, but the smile was sorrowful. "I had to try to tell you," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I understand that."

"You're my brother," he said, looking straight at me, and not smiling at all.

"Yes," I repeated, "yes. I understand that."

He turned back to the window, looking out. "All that hatred down there," he said, "all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart."

We went to the only night club on a short, dark street, downtown. We squeezed through the narrow, chattering, jam-packed bar to the entrance of the big room, where the bandstand was. And we stood there for a moment, for the lights were very dim in this room and we couldn't see. Then, "Hello, boy," said a voice and an enormous black man, much older than Sonny or myself, erupted out of all that atmospheric lighting and put an arm around Sonny's shoulder. "I been sitting right here," he said, "waiting for you."

He had a big voice, too, and heads in the darkness turned toward us.

Sonny grinned and pulled a little away, and said, "Creole, this is my brother. I told you about him."

Creole shook my hand. "I'm glad to meet you, son," he said, and it was clear that he was glad to meet me *there,* for Sonny's sake. And he smiled, "You got a real musician in *your* family," and he took his arm from Sonny's shoulder and slapped him, lightly, affectionately, with the back of his hand.

"Well. Now I've heard it all," said a voice behind us. This was another musician, and a friend of Sonny's, a coal-black, cheerful-looking man, built close to the ground. He immediately began confid-

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ing to me, at the top of his lungs, the most terrible things about Sonny, his teeth gleaming like a lighthouse and his laugh coming up out of him like the beginning of an earthquake. And it turned out that everyone at the bar knew Sonny, or almost everyone; some were musicians, working there, or nearby, or not working, some were simply hangers-on, and some were there to hear Sonny play. I was introduced to all of them and they were all very polite to me. Yet, it was clear that, for them, I was only Sonny's brother. Here, I was in Sonny's world. Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood.

They were going to play soon and Creole installed me, by myself, at a table in a dark corner. Then I watched them, Creole, and the little black man, and Sonny, and the others, while they horsed around, standing just below the bandstand. The light from the bandstand spilled just a little short of them and, watching them laughing and gesturing and moving about, I had the feeling that they, nevertheless, were being most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly: that if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame. Then, while I watched, one of them, the small, black man, moved into the light and crossed the bandstand and started fooling around with his drums. Then—being funny and being, also, extremely ceremonious—Creole took Sonny by the arm and led him to the piano. A woman's voice called Sonny's name and a few hands started clapping. And Sonny, also being funny and being ceremonious, and so touched, I think, that he could have cried, but neither hiding it nor showing it, riding it like a man, grinned, and put both hands to his heart and bowed from the waist.

Creole then went to the bass fiddle and a lean, very bright-skinned brown man jumped up on the bandstand and picked up his horn. So there they were, and the atmosphere on the bandstand and in the room began to change and tighten. Someone stepped up to the microphone and announced them. Then there were all kinds of murmurs. Some people at the bar shushed others. The waitress ran around, frantically getting in the last orders, guys and chicks got closer to each other, and the lights on the bandstand, on the quartet, turned to a kind of indigo. Then they all looked different there. Creole looked about him for the last time, as though

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he were making certain that all his chickens were in the coop, and then he—jumped and struck the fiddle. And there they were.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours. I just watched Sonny's face. His face was troubled, he was working hard, but he wasn't with it. And I had the feeling that, in a way, everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him, both waiting for him and pushing him along. But as I began to watch Creole, I realized that it was Creole who held them all back. He had them on a short rein. Up there, keeping the beat with his whole body, wailing on the fiddle, with his eyes half closed, he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shore line and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water.

And, while Creole listened, Sonny moved, deep within, exactly like someone in torment. I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do. And a piano is just a piano. It's made out of so much wood and wires and little hammers and big ones, and ivory. While there's only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try to try and make it do everything.

And Sonny hadn't been near a piano for over a year. And he wasn't on much better terms with his life, not the life that stretched before him now. He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, started again; then seemed to have found a direction, panicked again, got

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stuck. And the face I saw on Sonny I'd never seen before. Everything had been burned out of it, and, at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there.

Yet, watching Creole's face as they neared the end of the first set, I had the feeling that something had happened, something I hadn't heard. Then they finished, there was scattered applause, and then, without an instant's warning, Creole started into something else, it was almost sardonic, it was *Am I Blue*. And, as though he commanded, Sonny began to play. Something began to happen. And Creole let out the reins. The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell this from his face. He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. It seemed that he couldn't get over it. Then, for awhile, just being happy with Sonny, they seemed to be agreeing with him that brand-new pianos certainly were a gas.

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation. Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues. He made the little black man on the drums know it, and the bright, brown man on the horn. Creole wasn't trying any longer to get Sonny in the water. He was wishing him Godspeed. Then he stepped back, very slowly, filling

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the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself.

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, Amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky.

Then it was over. Creole and Sonny let out their breath, both soaking wet, and grinning. There was a lot of applause and some of it was real. In the dark, the girl came by and I asked her to take drinks to the bandstand. There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after awhile I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling.

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Theodore Roethke

WHAT CAN I TELL MY BONES?

(An Old Lady Musing)

I

Beginner,
Perpetual beginner,
The soul knows not what to believe,
In its small folds, stirring sluggishly,
In the least place of its life,
A pulse beyond nothingness,
A fearful ignorance.

Before the moon draws back,
Dare I blaze like a tree?

In a world always late afternoon,
In the circular smells of a slow wind,
I listen to the weeds' vesperal whine,
Longing for absolutes that never come.
And shapes make me afraid:
The dance of natural objects in the mind,
The immediate sheen, the reality of straw,
The shadows crawling down a sunny wall.

A bird sings out in solitariness
A thin harsh song. The day dies in a child.
How close we are to the sad animals!
I need a pool; I need a puddle's calm.

O my bones,
Beware those perpetual beginnings,
Thinning the soul's substance;
The swan's dread of the darkening shore,

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Or these insects pulsing near my skin,
The songs from a spiral tree.

Fury of wind, and no apparent wind,
A gust blowing the leaves suddenly upward,
A vine lashing in dry fury,
A man chasing a cat,
With a broken umbrella,
Crying softly.

II

It is difficult to say all things are well,
When the worst is about to arrive;
It is fatal to woo yourself,
However graceful the posture.

Loved heart, what can I say?
When I was a lark, I sang;
When I was a worm, I devoured.

The self says, I am;
The heart says, I am less;
The spirit says, you are nothing.

Mist alters the rocks. What can I tell my bones?
My desire's a wind trapped in a cave.
The spirit declares itself to these rocks.
I'm a small stone, loose in the shale.
Love is my wound.

The wide streams go their way,
The pond lapses back into a glassy silence.
The cause of God in me—has it gone?
Do these bones live? Can I live with these bones?
Mother, mother of us all, tell me where I am!

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O to be delivered from the rational into the realm of pure song.
My face on fire, close to the points of a star,
A learned nimble girl,
Not drearily bewitched,
But sweetly daft.

To try to become like God
Is far from becoming God.
O, but I seek and care!

I rock in my own dark,
Thinking, God has need of me.
The dead love the unborn.

III

Weeds turn toward the wind weed-skeletons.
How slowly all things alter.
Existence dares perpetuate a soul.
A wedge of heaven's light, autumnal song.
I hear a beat of birds, the plangent wings
That disappear into a waning moon;
The barest speech of light among the stones.

To what more vast permission have I come?
When I walk past a vat, water joggles.
I no longer cry for green in the midst of cinders,
Or dream of the dead, and their holes.
Mercy has many arms.

Instead of a devil with horns, I prefer a serpent with scales;
In temptation, I rarely seek counsel;
A prisoner of smells, I would rather eat than pray.
I'm released from the dreary dance of opposites.
The wind rocks with my wish; the rain shields me;
I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;
Sometimes I think I'm several.

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The sun! The sun! And all we can become!
And the time ripe for running to the moon!
In the long fields, I leave my father's eye;

And shake the secrets from my deepest bones;
My spirit rises with the rising wind;
I'm thick with leaves and tender as a dove,
I take the liberties a short life permits—
I seek my own meekness;
I recover my tenderness by long looking.
By midnight I love everything alive.
Who took the darkness from the air?
I'm wet with another life.
Yea, I have gone and stayed.

What came to me vaguely is now clear,
As if released by a spirit,
Or agency outside me.
Unprayed-for,
And final.

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Richard Chase

THE FATE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

It is the custom nowadays to pronounce the avant-garde dead. But the fact seems to be that under modern conditions the avant-garde is a permanent movement. Far from being merely the isolated band of highbrows and sterile academicians many Americans think it is, the vanguard of writers and artists has been, for more than one hundred and fifty years, a necessary part of the cultural economy, and the health of culture depends upon its recurring impulse to experimentation, its search for radical values, its historical awareness, its flexibility and receptivity to experience, its polemical intransigence.

Historically the avant-garde is the heir to the aristocratic coterie or court circle of artists and intellectuals. But whereas the aristocratic coterie of medieval and Renaissance times had no commitment except to itself and posterity and consequently felt free to cultivate the disinterested pursuit of art and ideas apart from the rest of society, history has imposed upon the modern avant-garde the duty not only of disinterestedly cultivating art and ideas but of educating and leading an aimless body of philistine taste and opinion.

The historical role of the avant-garde was thus necessitated by the breakdown of the aristocratic class and by the spread of literacy. After the eighteenth century, the democratization of culture and the new literacy confronted the advanced intelligence with a newly arisen welter of taste and opinion which, left to itself, found no other standards than the conformism, at once aggressive and complacent, of the bourgeoisie. In this situation the dissident intellectual, himself characteristically a bourgeois, found his mission. The mediocrity and, as it were, historical helplessness of his class in matters of art and ideas were an open invitation to his powers of discrimination and foresight. At the same time, his instinct for self-preservation and

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his powers of polemic were animated and challenged by the hostility with which his efforts were met.

In America especially, official middle-class opinion is always relegating its avant-garde to the ash-can, but the phoenix rises again. The death of the avant-garde could only come about if all expressions of taste and opinion were reduced to standardized commodities, such as are purveyed by mass culture. If this should happen there would be so little openness of mind, so little variability of preference and commitment, that not only the avant-garde but all significant activities in arts and letters would cease to be. But there does not seem to be any immediate danger of this, despite the enormous influence of the mass media. The vital dialectics of American culture still have room to operate.

Any cultural vanguard must have roots in its native soil, yet it is freer of nationalism than the rest of middle-class opinion and feels its ties with foreign intellectual movements. The dissident intelligentsia, if one may use so grand a term, is therefore international as well as national and has a unity of purpose apart from local economic and political conditions. Thus one may find inspiration and hope in the continuing identity of the restive avant-garde in Communist countries, like Poland and Hungary, where the cultural commissar exerts a crushing influence in imposing conformist values on artists and thinkers, values which are in so many ways indistinguishable from those of the middle-class philistine in non-Communist countries.

But if the avant-garde is not dead, it remains true that its recent phase of "modernism" and experimentalism in the arts is, after forty years of struggle, finally exhausted. Why should it not be exhausted?—considering that, as Joseph Frank says, "we are now at the tail-end of the greatest flowering of American arts and letters since New England transcendentalism—a flowering that far surpasses the earlier one in force and originality." Without the concerted effort of the free spirits of the time, in the flow and upsurge of their power, this flowering would not have come about. We now inevitably find ourselves in a period of suspended animation and cultural confusion. If we are ever to set the ball rolling again, we have got to be clear first about the traditional significance of the avant-garde in its international and its native aspect and, second, about the cultural dialectic

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which in the past it has articulated and vivified in this country.

Although it is obviously not so, many intelligent people persist in the belief that the avant-garde is self-appointed, that it is historically gratuitous and irrelevant. It is accused of perversely *alienating itself* from what is vaguely referred to as the broad healthy mainstream of culture. Philip Rahv has commented on this attitude in a passage which, since it should be classic in this discussion, I quote at length:

> The neo-philistines make an opportune kind of optimism their credo; they are impatient to assume the unchallengeable reality of the "world," and while reconciled to mass-culture they are inclined to deprecate the traditional attitudes of the literary and artistic avant-garde —attitudes said to arise out of negativism pure and simple and willful indulgence in "alienation." Now the avant-garde is of course open to criticism. It has the typical faults of its incongruous position in a mass-society, such as snobbery and pride of caste. It is disposed to take a much too solemn and devotional view of the artist's vocation. Its distortions of perspective result from its aloofness and somewhat inflexible morality of opposition. But to accuse it of having invented alienation is ludicrous. For what the avant-garde actually represents historically, from its very beginnings in the early nineteenth century, is the effort to preserve the integrity of art and the intellect amidst the conditions of alienation brought on by the major social forces of the modern era. The avant-garde has attempted to ward off the ravages of alienation in a number of ways: by means of developing a tradition of its own and cultivating its own group norms and standards, by resisting the bourgeois incentives to accommodation, and perforce making a virtue of its separateness from the mass. That this strategy has in the main been successful is demonstrated by the only test that really counts—the test of creative achievement. After all, it is chiefly the avant-garde which must be given credit for the production of most of the literary masterpieces of the past hundred years, from *Madame Bovary* to the *Four Quartets;* and the other arts are equally indebted to its venturesome spirit.

The French Encyclopedists showed many of the characteristics of the avant-garde, but probably, as Mr. Rahv suggests, a more distinctly modern form of cultural advance was to be seen in the German and English, and later in the French romantic movements. The Wordsworth-Coleridge group was avant-garde in the modern sense, and in various countries and under varying conditions their kind of insur-

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gence has been repeated in waves of forward-moving and receding energy.

It should be noted in passing that although we see in Wordsworth and Coleridge and later in Keats, Shelley and Byron two phases of cultural insurgence, the dialectics of English culture are somewhat misleading when the attempt is made to apply them to American culture. This analogy is always made by middlebrow writers in their effort to cut the ground out from under the vanguard. They tell us that sometimes there is no need for a dissident intelligentsia, and in support of this argument they point to the Victorian age, when not only inferior writers but the great writers of the time won more or less immediate public esteem and authority. It is true that this happened in England, but it did not happen in America, where the great writers were not the popular ones. The great writers, like Melville, Whitman, and James, had to content themselves with a fugitive notoriety and long neglect. By comparison with America England is an organic and continuous culture. What has not been sufficiently seen is that American culture shows far more enduring contradictions and discontinuities than does English culture—or if this has been seen, its consequences have not yet been understood. American civilization, happily similar to English in many ways and particularly in its political character, tends, in the quality of its cultural movements, to resemble French and Russian civilization, at least in the sense that it shows very disparate extremes of taste and opinion. The statement that French culture is a long dialectical argument between Pascal and Montaigne is an inevitable and significant truth. Van Wyck Brooks' idea that American culture is similarly typified by the difference between Jonathan Edwards (the "highbrow") and Benjamin Franklin (the "lowbrow") is also a far-reaching truth. But English cultural history offers no such clear-cut polarities. At certain periods of its history England has evolved an admirable middle culture, a main body of taste and opinion, into which the avant-garde, never radically alienated in the first place, could be temporarily absorbed, without detriment to the cultural life of the nation. This has never happened in America, where all the great things have been done by lowbrows or by highbrows and where the middle culture, beginning with Howells, has been mediocre, has too easily found its motives in commercialism and academic conformity, has incongru-

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ously patterned itself on the English model, and has thus fundamentally misunderstood and feared the really definitive characteristics of American culture.[1]

Mr. Rahv says that the avant-garde tends to develop "a tradition of its own" and to cultivate "its own group norms and standards." And herein lies the paradox, for like all traditions and standards, these are subject to calcification and are therefore in need of perpetual change and renewal. Indeed, one must admit that the cultural vanguard is more subject to calcification than are other traditions. Its necessary extremism and its intensely articulated polemical attitude not only give it dynamism but lay it open to rigidification and sterility, whereas the very aimlessness of conventional culture saves it from these extremes.

The insurgent movement in this country which defended "modernism"—that is, the aesthetic experimentalism and social protest of the period between 1912 and 1950—has expired of its own success. Until recently the avant-garde writer, who made it his mission to promote "modernism," could feel that he was (in Van Wyck

1 I am well aware that this will sound to some readers too abstract and willful, too gratuitously intransigent. I am aware too of the genuine middlebrow virtues which were articulated and defended by Howells, pale and derivative as they are compared with English middlebrowism. It is true that enlightened publishers and professors are for the moment hospitable to talents of high order—of the sort which formerly in this country they would take seriously only after resisting a long avant-garde campaign. For example, Dylan Thomas quickly gained such popularity as comes to serious poets without much intervention by avant-garde critics. The paperback classics, old and new, appear really to have discovered a fairly large audience of discerning readers. The general complacency that most people feel these days about the middle culture and the favorable situation of the writer and artist in America may actually turn out to have some justification. It is possible that history has in store for us a more organic and continuous culture than we have had in the past. Perhaps the new suburban, totally-populated, bureaucratized, and other-directed America is already rendering historically archaic the kind of culture critique which, following writers like Tocqueville and the early Brooks, I have been bringing to bear on the problem of the avant-garde. Perhaps there has already evolved a fundamentally new situation which has brought to a conclusion not only the modernist phase but the whole history of our culture from the seventeenth century down to 1950. It may be, in short, that the kind of critique suggested in these pages applies only (to go on with Riesman's handy terms) to the older Calvinist, production-oriented, inner-directed America. In the new America there may be no need for the avant-garde spirit—or for culture. Meanwhile, although the future is obscure, we have one clear option before us: we can at least try to understand the past and the present.

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Brooks' phrase) "employed by civilization." Now he is more likely employed only by a university or a publishing house. The university and the publishing house have accepted Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Melville, James, Hemingway, and Faulkner—authors the avant-gardist once touted in vain—just as conclusively as Tennyson was ever accepted. And it appears that civilization no longer offers the insurgent intellectual or artist a job, or if it does, it is not the same job, and the particular tastes, ideas, and purposes it calls for are by no means clear. Still, the erstwhile insurgent modernist who believes that one phase of the avant-garde movement is dead but that the stratagem of avant-garde activity is of permanent value in America may at least look into the past, partly with the hope of catching a glimpse of the future.

As we have been told at length, the serious writer of the nineteenth century was painfully on his own. We are not surprised to find two of the most isolated of these writers pleading for what we should call an avant-garde movement. Thus Melville begs his contemporaries to "confess" immediately the greatness of Hawthorne without waiting for the slow judgment of posterity, which, whatever it may be, will do neither Hawthorne nor his generation any good, at least not while they still have the power of further accomplishment. "By confessing him," in Melville's well-known words, "you thereby confess others; you brace the whole brotherhood. For genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round." Yet Melville's plea had no more effect than the similar plea in Henry Adams' letter of 1862 to his brother Charles Francis: "What we want is a *school*. We want a national set of young men like ourselves or better, to start new influences not only in politics, but in literature, in law, in society, and throughout the whole social organism of the country—a national school of our own generation." As it turned out, Adams' broadly based insurgent intelligentsia was even less possible than Melville's more purely literary "brotherhood."

There was, to be sure, sporadic insurgent activity in the nineteenth century. The Concord transcendentalists were a genuine avant-garde movement. There were tenuous and momentary groups like the "young America" writers of the 1830s who contributed to the *Democratic Review*. Walt Whitman, himself in one sense a member

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of the transcendentalist group, was a kind of one-man vanguard with a number of sadly inferior disciples around him, such as O'Connor and the Pfaff beer-cellar wits and bohemians. But Whitman's plea in *Democratic Vistas* for a new school of "literatuses" who would combat the conventional, genteel writers of the day and prophesy and articulate a radical American culture reminds us that during his middle and old age no such movement appeared and that, despite his disciples, Whitman was nearly as isolated as Melville and Adams.

However, about 1912 a genuine vanguard movement emerged in this country, in dramatic response both to the historical demands and possibilities of American culture and in response to the international movement of "modernism." The tremendous energy liberated by this upsurge of creativity and criticism, despite the disasters that successively overtook it in the form of two world wars and a great depression, lasted for nearly forty years. There seems to be no generally accepted name for the six years or so after 1912 when the character of the modern movement in arts and letters was defined and the cultural energy we have been drawing on ever since was finally able to break through the conventional surface of American life. "Resurgence" is perhaps the most accurate word. The movement did not happen in a vacuum; it had been prepared (to look no farther back) by the social critics of the second half of the last century, notably Whitman, Adams, Howells, Bellamy, and Veblen. The ground had been laid, too, by the European heralds of modern times, such as Marx, Arnold, Shaw, Freud, and Nietzsche (whose writings constitute a philosophy and psychology of avant-garde action). It was the first time since the transcendentalist period that the barriers of provincialism were broken down and the most important minds of Europe were felt immediately, without being bowdlerized and filtered through the medium of genteel or middlebrow criticism.

Although it had a sense of a common purpose, the Resurgence was a many-sided affair, including the prophetic literary nationalism of Brooks and his associates, the poetic *risorgimento* of Ezra Pound and his group, the political-literary liberalism of Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly in the *New Republic,* the pragmatism of Dewey, the New History of Beard and James Harvey Robinson, the popularized Nietzschean iconoclasm of Mencken, and so on. Despite the dis-

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continuity of taste and opinion that characterized the three decades after 1920—so that a writer who felt culturally at home in 1920 might feel totally at sea in 1930 and at sea all over again but in a different way in 1940—one could still draw on the emotional and intellectual capital of the Resurgence. This was true not only of the avant-garde but of the liberal middlebrow critics who soon began to oppose everything radical and extreme in modern culture, and it was true also of such momentary "counter-revolutionary" groups as the New Humanists.

Yet notwithstanding this continuity of energy in the midst of bewildering historical changes, there was a tragic wastefulness in the modern movement. The impact of the First World War fragmented and dispersed the Resurgence into the brilliant but unstable individual performances of the writers and artists of the 1920s. The economic pressures of the 1930s brought about a revival of the social concerns of 1912, but the generous and hopeful (and in some ways, it must be admitted, unrealistic) reform programs of the Resurgence were reduced to forms of doctrinaire politics, whether of the left or the right, which could not stand the test of time. The dispersal of energies in the 1920s and the reductive and repressive consolidations of the 1930s, historically inevitable as they may have been, left little cultural capital in the bank and failed to open up any significant new sources of renewal and recoupment.

The literary academicism of the 1940s was on the whole a fairly tame movement, although I cannot refrain from expressing my feeling that that period has been much maligned. The unintimidated critic is still wanting who will prove brave enough to defend a decade which saw the emergence of writers like Saul Bellow, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Ralph Ellison, Alfred Kazin, Isaac Rosenfeld, Mary McCarthy, and Leslie Fiedler, among many others—a decade which, furthermore, if it was too academic, nevertheless came to understand American culture and its "usable past" much more accurately than they were ever understood before.

In general, one may say that all the clamoring spirits of 1912-1918 were avant-garde, Van Wyck Brooks as much so as Ezra Pound. After the war, however, a large segment left the avant-garde and, like Brooks himself, fell back on the cultural middle ground that had been

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prepared by Howells, the protean Howells, who had his complacent as well as his radical side. Brooks abdicated from modern culture about 1925, drawing back in horror from the genie whose bottle his early polemics had helped to unstopper. For behold! among the great writers who really spoke for the present and the future were Eliot, Joyce, Proust, Gide, Hemingway, and Pound, and they all seemed to Brooks culturally dangerous—they were, he said, undemocratic, highbrow, coterie writers.

Ever since Brooks' abdication, one of the main debates of American intellectual life has been that between the middlebrow and the highbrow (both claiming an affinity with or disowning the intellectually inarticulate lowbrow as it suited their purposes). The middlebrow claims to swim in the main stream of life and of culture and accuses the highbrow of irrelevance, ignorance, and sterility. The highbrow retorts that the middlebrow's "main stream of life and culture" is more than likely only the backwaters of history, or the stagnant waters of conventional success.

Pound and Brooks have been in many ways the typical symbols of our modern cultural debate. From a historical point of view, they seem oddly alike, especially in their early days. This is a fact of more than passing interest, as was pointed out by C. G. Wallis a long time ago. Both Pound and Brooks claim a descent from Whitman. Both launched about 1915 a program for the radical revision of taste and opinion. Both assume a vigorous pedagogic tone, alternately iconoclastic and prophetic. Both plead for a concerted intelligentsia. They are both against puritanism, Babbittry, and gentility and in favor of the new realism. They evolve their different but complementary versions of the "usable past" and come up with a rather narrow canon of sacred texts; with Pound it is Dante, Guido, Sappho, Arnaut, Chaucer; with Brooks, it is Ruskin, Ste.-Beuve, William Morris, Taine, Nietzsche. They share a strong but not too clear idea of the high office of the Poet as a social force. They both stress the cultural poverty of America, Pound speaking of "poets astray in the villages" and Brooks of "the ordeal of Mark Twain." Mr. Wallis points out that they are both examples of "the self-educated man whose urge to moralize outstrips his taste and judgment," that "neither of them is much good at discursive reasoning," that "both writers have worked hard at perfecting a pastiche style; more than

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a third of the *Cantos* is translation or paraphrase; the fabric of Brooks' New England books is largely paraphrase or quotation without quotation marks."

Without trying to make too much out of these broad similarities, one can see that they do suggest once again the well-known fact that cultural battles are always bitterest between antagonists who are in some ways alike. They also suggest a good deal of immaturity, insecurity, and provincialism on both sides of the fence. And in fact the continuing virulence of the highbrow-middlebrow debate in this country bespeaks what is in many ways a still raw civilization.

Thus it was alternately disheartening and amusing to find the now Olympian Brooks descending into the arena again, as he did recently in an essay in the *Times Book Review*, in order to attack the avant-garde. My innocent response, on picking up Brooks' article was something like this: If only Van Wyck Brooks, who throughout his long career has done so much great work and has meant so much to all of us, would say something disorderly, like the aging Whitman, or the aging Yeats, or even the aging Howells—instead of launching one more dull attack on the highbrows. But no—he still complains that Pound "chucked out" Virgil and Thucydides and that Joyce "satirized out of existence so many of the greatest writers," and so on. Brooks' idea that at present "avant-garde circles" stretch "from one end of the country to another," each submitting itself to the "party line" is of course the sheerest fantasy. It is an example of the tactic of those who say that the "critics" and the quarterly magazines now maintain a tight reactionary grip over the cultural life of America. The second step in this generally bogus argument is to present the reigning middlebrowism of our time as if it were a form of rebellion instead of what it actually is—namely, the most successful form of cultural complacency in the Age of Eisenhower. Where and what is "the parent intellectual body" with which Brooks says the avant-garde should restore its ties? Where and what is "the mainland of American thinking" from which the "magic island" of the advanced intellectuals is detached? Not that these are necessarily meaningless concepts—but what *do* they mean?

The concern of the critic at present should be exactly this alleged middle ground of culture, this more or less mythic center of taste and opinion—on the assumption, that is, that the duty of the critic is al-

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ways to concern himself with whatever looks like the most powerful form of obscurantism and the most self-interested and successful kind of cultural mystique and polemic at any given time. There is no service in attacking the avant-garde critics, as everyone, including most of the critics themselves, are doing these days. It is all too clear what is wrong with them. Or if not, let me repeat: their specifically polemical task of the last forty years has expired with the success of the movements they championed. They have not yet clearly formulated what their duties in this interim period are. Meanwhile, they suffer from the well-known maladies of the avant-gardist, especially on the ebb tide of his influence: sterility, academicism, willful and excessive intellectuality.

But although the most forward-looking critics of the day should be trying to keep alive such imperfect dialectics as have been evolved in the effort to understand American culture, although they should be asking what is meant by "the parent intellectual body" and "the mainland of American thinking," the familiar attitude is quite different. William Barrett has recently expressed the widespread feeling of intellectuals by saying: "since I have left the world of the highbrow, the terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' do not seem to me to clarify human issues as much as I once thought they did." There is much to be said for this attitude, suggesting, as it does, two things —first, that the goal of the relaxed and enlightened man should be a flexibility of taste and, second, that the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" only imperfectly correspond to realities. But to this latter argument I am always moved to reply that, imperfect as they are, they refer broadly to the main fact of our culture—its discontinuity and inner contradiction. These terms, or something like them, are therefore not dispensable, unless historically realistic statements about American culture are also dispensable.

Yet the tendency of the best critical minds of the time is to try to achieve a flexible receptivity which breaks down distinctions and allows the critic to be highbrow, lowbrow, middlebrow all at once. The best critics find an article like that of Brooks in the *Times,* or a highbrow reply to Brooks which uses the same terms, to be artificial. In other words, their ideal is to contain and express the contradictions of culture, rather than to take a stand on one side or another. Edmund Wilson, for example, was once a hero of radical intran-

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sigence; now he is most admired for his flexibility and variousness.

William Phillips' description of the modern artist as " a suspended man" who "keeps the balance of opposing forces" fits not only the artist but the present-day ego-ideal of many critics. The artist "seems to be suspended," says Mr. Phillips, "between tradition and revolt, nationalism and internationalism, the aesthetic and the civic, and between belonging and alienation. Hence any movement to line him up on one side or another over-simplifies his role and limits his creative function."

In a much-quoted passage, Lionel Trilling applies the same idea specifically to American writers. He is disputing Parrington, who thought of American culture as a flow of two currents, one of liberals and one of reactionaries (and Mr. Trilling's comments would apply as well to writers like the early Brooks, who thought of our culture as a flow of two currents, one of highbrows and one of lowbrows). Culture, writes Mr. Trilling,

> is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate—it is nothing if not dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions; they contain within themselves, it may be said, the very essence of the culture, and the sign of this is that they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency. It is a significant circumstance of American culture, and one which is susceptible of explanation, that an unusually large proportion of its notable writers of the nineteenth century were such repositories of the dialectic of their times—they contained both the yes and the no of their culture, and by that token they were prophetic of the future.

This is a simple but profound formulation. How indeed shall we understand Cooper, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, Faulkner and the rest unless we see how inexhaustibly they embody the contradictions of their culture? That we now understand them in this way is the surest sign of our general advance over the older simplifications and partialities of historical criticism.

But does it follow from the fact that our great novelists and poets have succeeded by embodying the contradictions of our culture that the rest of us should try to do the same? Mr. Trilling does not say so, and yet if he did, he would be right—if he should add that

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this image of the versatile, or as Mr. Phillips says, "suspended" man is the proper and inevitable image for this interim period of our cultural history. Shouldn't one be able to enjoy *both* Whitman and Eliot, *both* Pound and Brooks, *both* Faulkner and J. P. Marquand, *both* Wallace Stevens and Sherwood Anderson?

What has happened to the avant-garde in our "suspended" culture of the 1950s is a psychological equivalent of what has happened to it sociologically. Sociologically it has been institutionalized by the universities and the publishers, which by definition means that in its modern phase it has to come to an end. At the same time, it has been internalized, so to speak, in the flexibly dialectical mind of contemporary criticism. In this withdrawal from the field of action it finds a possibility of continued life. The resiliency of the best critical minds must be counted on to keep the avant-garde attitude alive during periods which have no immediate task for its polemical mission.

Yet the task of the temperamental or born avant-garde critic is not limited to the polemical purpose of converting the philistines to art. He is also perennially the disinterested student and historian of culture, looking into the past and the present for the radical and not merely the contingent and incidental facts. The past convinces him that discontinuity and contradiction have always been of the essence of American culture. The present convinces him that among critics only the most powerful and resilient of "suspended" minds are capable of keeping alive the avant-garde spirit, or any spirit, or of embodying cultural contradictions of any sort without collapsing under the great strain into a formless middle way of feeling and thought. Who can doubt that this formless middle way of feeling and thought, with its increasing moralism and conventionality, is hardening into the new "cake of custom"? As for the future, one can only believe that the end of the present interim period will be marked by a new resurgence from the uneasy subliminal depths of our culture, in the classic manner of avant-garde action—provided, that is, that 1950 marks the end of a phase of American culture as we have known it, and not the end of that culture itself.

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Gregorio Marañón

GRANDEUR AND MISERY OF THE COUNT OF VILLAMEDIANA

Don Juan and the present era. The problem of Don Juan has undergone a complete change since the time when I first wrote about him. He no longer attracts the attention of critics and naturalists; he is becoming a subject for the archeologist. Life changes so quickly; and, above all, the conditions of our time have altered the mores of love. Even as late as twenty years ago Don Juan still stood for a particular theatrical, and at times heroic, masculine revolt against established sexual convention. But the convention itself has changed. I do not say that it is new, merely that it has changed. For, with regard to love, every possible attitude has at one time or another been adopted, and every possible emotion been experienced and made articulate.

The sexual conventions of contemporary society are marked by the unlimited license they accord to physical love, and by the increased social influence of women. Such mores are typical of the critical periods of history. Nevertheless, if sexual love is without any restraint, either moral or social, if amorous passion and enjoyment are never to be regarded as sinful, if the Comendador looks the other way when his daughter is outraged, and the lord of the manor intentionally delays his return home suspecting that his arrival might embarrass his wife, if woman no longer waits to receive everything she needs at our hands (so that we may give her everything—even, without being aware of it, our very freedom) but instead obtains for herself whatever she wants, whether it be a standard of living or the man of her choice—if this is the present state of affairs, what is Don Juan to us?

Don Juan was the symbol of the conqueror of women. A false symbol, in my opinion, as many symbols are. True or false, how-

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ever, he represented a reality: the whole daring, romantic theatrical machinery whose end was the seduction of women. Nowadays that machinery is obsolete. What was once stealthy intrigue and heroic adventure has now dwindled to a few words over the telephone and a quick ride in a car to the edge of town. It would be interesting to enlarge upon the fact that so elemental an emotion as love has been changed more by two purely mechanical inventions, the automobile and the telephone, than by any spiritual influence. These two have killed Celestina and Ciutti, the old abettors, and to a certain extent creators, of "The Seducer's" prestige.

But it would be an exaggeration to say that Don Juan has finally passed into history. Man's attitudes toward love are always the same, and they swing like a pendulum between two unchanging extremes: either love is dearly bought and is sublimated, or else love is cheap and is profaned. The latter is the case at the moment. Don Juan has hardly any reason to exist. Yet no one can be certain that his day may not come again.

Unselective sexuality: a theory. I myself once made the mistake of thinking that donjuanism must always follow a fixed pattern, a pattern which must condition forever the love life of its possessor. Such absolutely consistent characters are frequent on the stage, but in life they are extremely rare. For life is much longer and more complex than a play, and in life many Don Juans abandon the role entirely, long before the final curtain.

For example, many men go through a typical donjuanesque phase, during their adolescence and early youth. These are the episodic, youthful Don Juans. Zorilla's Don Juan Tenorio, the best and most popular of the literary ones, is a Don Juan only in his youth. No sooner does he see Doña Inés through a lattice, than he falls in love with her, utterly and slavishly, thereby abdicating his donjuanism. From then on, his exploits are mere gasconades, performed simply to keep up his prestige, his legend, "to shock the people of Seville" or of Naples, and above all, to justify in his own eyes his inner surrender. Many men have retraced the same cycle. Actually, this ephemeral donjuanism of youth, which is the most frequent sort, corroborates my theory about Don Juan's lack of virility, for adolescence is normally the indeterminate period of sexual vacil-

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lation. The genuine male, upon reaching maturity, ceases to be a Don Juan. Those who remain Don Juans to the end of their lives do so because they never outgrow the sexual indeterminatism of youth. And this is precisely the secret of their powers of seduction.

There are, of course, cases of belated donjuanism which seem to contradict this interpretation: men whose luck with women begins only in full maturity. Yet these cases must be carefully examined. The attractiveness of older men springs almost always from sources which have nothing to do with donjuanism, though there is a biological explanation for this too: men normally achieve success only in maturity, and it is their success, rather than a handsome face, which renders them attractive in their riper years. The only danger in this quite normal phenomenon is that the gentleman concerned may not recognize the cause of his good fortune, and may regard himself as still being a Don Juan.

Still, having granted all those provisos, the theory I once set forth of the equivocal virility of Don Juan seems to me to be more incontestable than ever, though its application should be tactfully restricted to a well-defined group of examples—the more characteristic ones. In this essay I do not intend to return to the biological consideration of Don Juan, but rather to deal with some interesting aspects of the legend. Two, in particular: the nationality of the legend, and the identity of the man who served as a model for Tirso de Molina's original Don Juan. However, it might make the body of this essay somewhat clearer if I were to provide a brief resumé of my theory, here at the start.

Don Juan is obsessed with women, and passes from one to another without ever remaining faithful to any. This is not because none of them satisfy him (as is hinted by some who confuse Don Juan with another sexual type, with which he has something in common), but, on the contrary, because Don Juan's rudimentary urge can be satisfied by any woman at all, princess or fish-wife, as we are emphatically told by Zorrilla's Tenorio. Now, what typifies the true male is precisely the high degree of selectivity he exercises in choosing the object of his love, and the localization of his desire in a precise feminine type which admits of slight variation, and often of none at all. The love of the true male is either strictly monogamous, or else reduces its preferences to a small number of women who

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generally resemble each other. What it amounts to is a limited number of variations on the same theme. Don Juan, on the contrary, is incapable of loving any fixed type of woman, even temporarily. What he is looking for is simply Woman: the opposite sex. Women, for him, are nothing more than the means of sexual satisfaction. His attitude, therefore, is the unselective one of the adolescent; it is also the attitude of the male of most species of animals. The researches of naturalists have recently provided some interesting illustrations of this, which I can only allude to here.

At the very outset of his literary legend, in the first scene of Tirso de Molina's play, Don Juan has entered the Duchess Isabela's bedroom in the dark, pretending to be her betrothed, and has rifled her chastity. This is Don Juan: the pure essence of donjuanism. A truly selective man, on the other hand, a genuine male, wants to see his beloved, and wants her to see him, for the awareness of each other's personalities is an indispensable condition of a great love. When the King, hearing the cries of the betrayed Duchess, enters and asks, "What is it?", Don Juan, with biological exactness, answers "Who could it be? A man and a woman." That is to say, not two individuals, Don Juan and Isabela, but two sexes face to face. And when Isabela, hearing Don Juan approaching her in the dark, asks him who he is, he answers, "Who am I? A man without a name." And there, definitively expressed in its first literary form, is the definition of Don Juan. He is a man without a name; a sex, not an individual.

The physique of the genuine Don Juan bears out this theory of his uncertain virility. Don Miguel de Mañara, who is supposed to be one of the models of "El Burlador," looks, in Murillo's portrait of him, like a beautiful girl. According to the only known authentic portrait of him, Casanova, a famous Don Juan, had the perfect and delicate features of a woman. Nearly all the Don Juans we know of were very different from the energetic and hirsute norm of the masculine prototype.

The physical appearance of men endowed with an unusual sexual capacity is, as a rule, somewhat anti-aesthetic. They tend to be rather short in stature, short-legged, with rough, sharply defined features, and thick skin closely covered with beard and hair. In fact not at all like the refined, elegant, smooth-complexioned Don

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Juans, beardless or with little pointed beards, whom we see promenading about in salons or on the stage. The minute care of his attire, and in some cases its provocative exaggeration, further emphasize the un-virile appearance of the typical Don Juan.

Our hero's incapacity to feel any of the pains of love is also quite typical of unselective virility. It is worthy of note that *there is not a single instance of a Don Juan ever being deeply afflicted, or wounded to the depths of his being*—though his vanity may have suffered at times—*because his beloved left him or betrayed him.* He is born with the knowledge that "he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword." Jealousy is alien to him. Once Don Juan has enjoyed a woman, he wants simply to get rid of her, so that she will not get in the way of future conquests. If some other man helps him at this point, by attracting the lady's attentions, so much the better. Consequently, rivals exist for Don Juan only until he has enjoyed a particular woman; once he has had his will with her, they are his rivals no longer.

This accounts for the traditional Don Juan's urge to travel. One might live for years, now, amid the huge and shifting populations of modern cities, and indulge with impunity in the donjuanesque game of seducing and abandoning many women in succession. But a hundred years ago, even in such capitals as Paris, Rome, or Madrid, life became untenable for his sort of conqueror after a very short time. The complications arising from each seduction and desertion forced them to seek out fresh fields for conquest, some distance away. So the indispensable instrument of Don Juan's activity was his horse, a creature swift as the wind; and each adventure ended in a gallop. In Tirso de Molina's play, Don Juan says to his servant, "Get the two mares ready, for all my exploits depend upon their flying feet." Each of his adventures was performed in a different place: Naples, Tarragona, Seville, Lebrija. The same thing is true of real Don Juans. Casanova's *Memoirs,* apart from being a collection of smutty anecdotes, is an endless narrative of his travels around the Continent. The nomadic existence of the Diplomatic Corps may account for the fact, which has been pointed out time and again, that there are so many Don Juans in it.

Also typical of the true Don Juan is his delight in scandal, and his deliberate display of his amorous triumphs. He exaggerates, even

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invents them, as adolescents do. Secrecy, on the other hand, is a necessary condition of great love. Scarcely any of the really deep things that have passed between men and women have ever been known by others. That is why we still know very little about love. In the center of the marketplace Don Juan describes his conquests to any who will listen. And he does this partly because his crude nature delights in airing his triumphs, be they spurious or genuine; and also because scandal is the best bait for new adventures.

Finally, the classical Don Juan is typified by his amorality in matters of love. Don Juan is essentially a trickster. Any means are fair which may result in a seduction. He regards any necessary sleight-of-hand and deceit simply as fun. His morality is merely the Machiavellian maxim, "The end justifies the means," applied to love. The true Don Juan is not deterred by any of the things which protect a woman against most men: innocence, marriage, difference of class or of religion, or the consideration of how a particular adventure may harm other people. Of course, in periods of transition, such as our own, there are no prejudices to be trampled on, and no convent walls need be climbed. Which, as I have said, accounts for the current pallor of Don Juan's personality.

The Spanish legend and Don Juan. Having re-stated my theory, let me now examine the two aspects of the problem of Don Juan which I mentioned above, and which are the real object of this essay. First, the essentially Spanish nature of Don Juan. Is Don Juan really Spanish, as everybody, public and critics alike, believe?

One of the authors who has written with most point about the problem of Don Juan, Gendarme de Bevotte, says that Don Juan is the only Spanish hero whom the whole of Europe has made its own. This is not, let me say in passing, entirely true, for Don Quixote is universal in the same sense as Don Juan is. And if Spain has given human mythology two figures of this stature, her contribution is immense: Faust is the only other of comparable universality. Yet I hope to show that although Don Juan, as far as the legend is concerned, was born in Spain, he is hardly Spanish at all. I will be told that all great human prototypes acquire their symbolic stature precisely because of their universal relevance, which surmounts all differences of nationality and of race. In the case of Don Juan, how-

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ever, it is difficult to dissociate him, in the mind of the public, from his Spanish connotations. The mere mention of Don Juan evokes Andalusian nights saturated with flowers, the deep blue of the sky, mysterious narrow streets, cloaked figures, funerals by night, and an enraged or merciful God, appearing (as though the miraculous were no more than natural) to the Spaniards, who experience no terror before the supernatural.

Yet all this Spanish glamour which surrounds the figure of Don Juan is pure ornament. It has nothing to do with the essential psychology of Don Juan, who represents one of the universal approaches to human love, and an approach less typical of Spain than of any other country in the world. The fact is that all these props are so dazzlingly picturesque, they so captivate the emotions, that they obscure the biological core of the problem. Nevertheless, this element of the picturesque, which is subsidiary to the main theme, does exercise a decisive influence upon the popularity and power of the great myths. The same thing is true of prominent figures of history, who, to a great extent, are myths also. Don Juan is popular because of his nocturnal wanderings about Seville, and his quarrels with the statues of the dead, whose stone beards he irreverently pulls. None of which has anything to do with donjuanism. In the same way, Faust is famous because of Mephistopheles, a secondary character in the vast metaphysical tragedy which Faust symbolizes.

To proceed with our demonstration, we must first of all analyze the two component parts of the legend of Don Juan. In the first place there is the fascinating man who attracts women, seduces them, deserts them and replaces them with others, in an endless pursuit of amorous experience. The second element of the legend is the religious theme, which merges with that of carnal passion. Under this heading we must list the protagonist's irreligious nature, his cynicism, his perpetual defiance of society, Church and God. And perhaps also the moral of the story, whether it takes the form of the punishment of the sinner or that of his final pardon.

Only the first of these two elements is essential to the psychology of Don Juan. The second one, however picturesque, contributes nothing basic to his personality. Which is why it has faded out so quickly, though in the beginning it was one of the most glamorous parts of the legend, and helped to establish the figure of

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Don Juan in the popular imagination. Since the middle of the nineteenth century the romantic legend of Don Juan has been a problem of biology. In 1886 Hayen coined the word *donjuanism*. The legend had been transformed from a literary myth into a form of human love. Don Juan had forgotten the Comendador's statue. His nights of love would no longer be punctuated with macabre invitations to the dead. Nevertheless, this modern Don Juan whom contemporary psychologists study is the same figure that Tirso de Molina's unsuspecting genius created and adorned.

If we eliminate all that is not essential to the personality of Don Juan, we are left simply with the extraordinarily attractive man, the perennial prototype of one form of human love. And what has this to do with Spain? I can answer that categorically. Since Don Juan represents an attitude toward love which is universal, he may be found in the Iberian Peninsula as well as anywhere else. But I insist that, far from being characteristically and originally Spanish, Don Juan's type of love is an exotic importation into Spain, without national roots or tradition.

The form of love which is most typically Spanish is (and this was true to an even greater extent in Tirso's era) that of the Castilian home: monogamous, austere to the point of mysticism. Usually there are a large number of children, who were conceived almost without sin; and the bedroom has the severe dignity of a cell.

The typical psychological pattern of the Spanish male is that of the cult of honor, in which the concept of honor may be carried to the point of violence, and is worth defending even at the cost of one's life. And in which honor will always, if necessary, justify revenge and even crime. And this idea is so typically Spanish that there is a considerable body of Spanish literature devoted to nothing else, including part of the works of Lope de Vega, Calderon, and the other dramatists of their period. This literature of the cult of honor is national in the strictest sense, more so even than that of the mystics. It could be nothing else but Spanish.

The typical Castilian male is not Don Juan but "the guardian of his own honor"—in other words, the husband, lover, father or brother who regards the virtue of his womenfolk as the depository of his conjugal honor and that of his family, who will stick at nothing to defend his honor, and who will avenge it not only when it suffers injury but even when an injury is only suspected.

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It is hardly necessary to point out that this "guardian of his own honor" who is so utterly Spanish, is the antithesis of Don Juan who never gives honor a thought and who is quite impervious to jealousy.

Don Juan's predecessors were Leucinio, in Juan de la Cueva's play *El Infamador* (The Defamer), and Leonidio, in Lope de Vega's *La Fianza Satisfecha* (The Redeemed Pledge). One can imagine the astonishment of the audience, most of them "guardians of their own honor," when these two Don Juans appeared on the Spanish stage: barbarians, completely anti-Spanish, and capable of affronting what to true Iberians is as sacred as God himself—the honor of their own families. Lope de Vega's attains the ultimate in wickedness by making love to his own sister. And he does this not out of love, which might justify the monstrous deed, but quite coolly, out of a desire "to insult his own blood" and thus "defy the world and God." This dreadful abuser of honor, this truly anti-Spanish monster, is diametrically opposed to the Castilian form of love. Don Juan is his successor.

Andalusia and Don Juan. But, it will be said, Don Juan does not come from Castile but from Andalusia, and Andalusia is something different. Scholars are so convinced that Don Juan comes from Seville that for years they have conducted researches into the traditions and chronicles of the great city on the banks of the Guadalquivir, in search of historical antecedents of the Seducer. There has been discussion, with no foundation at all, about certain Tenorios during the reign of Don Pedro the Cruel. And throughout the romantic period, and up until the present day, donjuanism has been identified with a certain gentleman of Seville, a rather more exciting figure, one Don Miguel de Mañara, who still enjoys, in literary circles, a certain reputation as a Don Juan. This is a mistake too, not only because Mañara lived much later than Tirso de Molina, and therefore could not have been Tirso's model, but also because Mañara was, above all, a mystic. No, it is useless to look in Andalusia for the originals of Don Juan.

For if Spain is an anti-donjuanesque country, Andalusia is the most anti-donjuanesque of all the regions of Spain, in spite of its picturesque appearance. The typically Andalusian form of love is

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the same chivalrous devotion, the same dedication to honor, which we found in Castile. Though there are two kinds of sexual behavior which are peculiarly Andalusian, are typical of the place, and have contributed to the misinterpretation of donjuanism.

One of these is the organized polygamy whose prototype was the harem, an invention of the Arabs, who left deep marks upon the character and customs of Andalusia. Nevertheless, it is obviously a mistake to confuse the moorish harem with the female clientele of Don Juan. The etymology of the word harem indicates that the custom was established for progenitive purposes, and in Don Juan the desire for fatherhood is nonexistent, and often he is sterile. The harem stays in one place, and Don Juan is a wanderer. The Sultan recruits the women for his harem by force, or with money, and without recourse to his own personal charms. The harem is always run on peaceful, well-organized bourgeois lines. Don Juan is just the opposite: each of his adventures is an anti-social action. Therefore, to confuse the one with the other is an inexcusable frivolity.

The Sultan's numerous wives are organized into a *status quo* of accepted hierarchies. Don Juan's affairs, on the other hand, follow on the heels of each other, each no better than the last. Each passion gives rise to indifference, and to the desertion of the beloved, whom he abandons in order to seek, somewhere else, the next one. It is true that there have always been, and still are, Andalusians who dream of being sultans, and quite a few of them enact a parody of this dream, while keeping within the laws of contemporary society. They will have a legitimate wife who represents the Sultana, shares the responsibility of the home, is the mother of their children, and in the long run the mistress of their deepest affection. Behind her back they enjoy a host of paramours with whom they satisfy their more ephemeral passions. In fact this sort of shamefaced harem is by no means exclusively Andalusian, even though its origins may be traced to Andalusia. It exists more or less openly all over the Latin world, and beyond. So firmly is it established, that often the legitimate wife, like the Sultana of the harem, is aware of, and condones her husband's polygamous affairs. There are even cases in which the legitimate wife is secretly proud of her husband's diverse sexual activities. This was true of the protagonist of Benavente's fine play *Señora Ama,* and she was drawn from life.

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All this is part of our purely Arab inheritance. Yet to confuse the sensual and peaceful Arab converts of Andalusia and the Latin world, with the mercurial and rebellious Don Juan, is also an inexcusable frivolity.

There is another, and more picturesque sexual pattern in Andalusia: the kind of love typical of the gypsies. Don Miguel de Unamuno used to say that the gypsy influence on our national character is stronger than the moorish influence. It would be hard to measure it exactly. But unquestionably the gypsy influence is very strong. It has given birth to a whole literature, and to a vast amount of romantic folk-lore, both of which have helped to spread and exaggerate that influence. And in the matter of love, this influence is quite apparent. The love life of the gypsies is obviously of Oriental origin. And because of its fiery passions, its constant intermixture of religious matters, its tendency to resolve itself by means of violence and blood, it too has been confused with Don Juan's type of love.

Yet gypsy love, burning, unending, forever dreaming of death, comparing the beloved to the Holy Virgin, fusing them both in the same passion, finding its truest expression in the wonderful verses of the *cante jondo,* has nothing in common with Don Juan's cynical and irreligious libertinism. Gypsy love is deep, enduring, ardently monogamous, almost mystical, incapable of deserting the beloved. In short, it is the opposite in every way, of the inferior, indefinite, fickle sexuality of "El Burlador."

When a true Don Juan emerges in Andalusia, he is always either a foreigner or an uprooted Andalusian. This was the case with Tirso de Molina's Don Juan, who had learned his technique of loveless seduction while at the cosmopolitan Court in Madrid, or while wandering through the towns of Italy. In Andalusia, where they are great ones for gestures, one may run across a young man with the petulant air which recalls the true Don Juan. But despite his cocky ways the young gentleman will almost certainly end up committed to one of the two anti-donjuanesque forms of love, either shamefaced polygamy, the occidental version of the harem, or else a deep, steadfast, lifelong passion, of which the life of Don Miguel de Mañara affords us a magnificent example. This great *sevillano* (who, incidentally, was of Corsican ancestry—that is to say, he had Italian blood as well) has been compared, stupidly, with Don Juan. Actually

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he bears a much closer resemblance to Saint Francis of Borgia. For Mañara was, I repeat, a mystic, whose turbulent youth, which indeed contained quite a number of donjuanesque characteristics, was merely the preparation for his ultimate saintliness.

Don Juan in ancient times. The Renaissance. Let us repeat once more our conclusion: Don Juan is not a Spanish prototype, still less is he an Andalusian prototype. Donjuanism is a product of decaying societies, and our hero trailed his cynicism in the wake of several declining civilizations while Spain was no more than the embryo of a people, with no national structure. It is easy to find perfect Don Juans in pre-Christian Greece and Rome. In Rome was published the first, the most cynical and perfect manual of Donjuanesque love ever written, the *Ars Amandi.* Ovid himself was a Don Juan, with all the glories of a Don Juan, and with all the squalor and sexual ambivalence.

The sturdy and fertile Middle Ages hardly provided propitious ground for donjuanism. There were Don Juans in medieval Europe, but they were eccentrics. Chivalry provided the kind of love typical of those centuries: self-sacrificing, monogamous, overcoming even death. Or else the absolute devotion, silent, mystical, almost sexless, to a woman whom the lover had glimpsed rather than seen, such as Dante's love for Beatrice. In short, nothing which suggests Don Juan's kind of love.

Donjuanism reappears with new vigor during the Renaissance. This formidable movement was characterized from its outset by the element of moral decadence underlying its youthful energy. The corrupt spirit of antiquity, which seemed to be dead, was merely dormant; when it awoke it infused its influence, like a subtle poison, into that great dawning of the world. This is not by any means the only example in human history of a strong rejuvenating social force which is born with a perverted spirit. One of the symptoms of that perversion is donjuanesque love, which is really nothing but Machiavellianism applied to human love.

The Machiavellian morals—which allowed the Duke of Valentinois to get rid of his enemies without the slightest qualm, are precisely those which Don Juan employs when dealing with the women whom he seduces and deserts as a *condottiere* does his citadels, merely

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for the pleasure of plundering and then setting forth on a fresh conquest. The relation of Machiavellianism to donjuanism deserves a more detailed study than I can attempt here. I must, however, mention, that the earliest known embryo of the theatrical Don Juan is Count Leoncio, in a play by the Jesuits of Ingolstadt, in 1615. This appalling libertine and defiler of everything sacred was a follower of Machiavelli. The playwright considered this detail so important that he included it in the rather lengthy title, which read: "The History of Count Leoncio, who, corrupted by Machiavelli, came to a miserable end." Don Juan has never forgotten the corrupting lessons he learned from Machiavelli.

It is utterly unjust to compare Don Juan, as is often done, with the Spanish conquistadores. With the *condottiere,* yes, but not with the conquistador. For the latter was hard, strong, sometimes cruel, but filled with a righteous idealism completely lacking in the *condottiere.* Which is why the *condottiere* left only the most ephemeral of legends, whereas the Spanish conquistadores left an indelible mark wherever they set foot.

Donjuanism invaded Europe just as Renaissance architecture did. It reached Spain, as it did other countries, and took root there, especially in Madrid, for the Spanish Court was at that time the capital of the largest state in Europe, and the vital influences from all over the Continent converged there. Madrid, in fact, swarmed with Don Juans, and the chronicles and news-sheets of the period are stuffed with the adventures of those exalted and immoral noblemen, nearly all of whom had been educated in the great university of unscrupulous behavior that was Italy. Any of them could have served as a model for Tirso de Molina.

Why Don Juan was born in Spain. Actually, the same thing happened in the other Courts of Europe. If the Don Juan of literature was born in Spain, rather than in France or in Italy, that is because of a circumstance which nowadays is quite obvious. Since Don Juan is a rebel against the existing social and religious orthodoxy, it is apparent that his rebellious exploits would be more heroic, more spectacular, in Spain than anywhere else. For the powers against which he rebelled, God and the State, were stronger in Spain than elsewhere. In no other European country could Don Juan's rebellious-

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ness have had the same dramatic effect that it had in a State whose private and public mores were as strict as ours were. In other words, nowhere but in Spain could Don Juan have become a hero. And since every human protest against the existing order is most violent where the order is most strict, the Spanish Don Juan was not content, as a French or Italian one might have been, with shocking timid souls and upsetting magistrates and bishops. He defied God Himself, breaking into convents, and rashly insulting the marble statues of the dead. This sacrilegious impulse, however subsidiary to the donjuanesque theme, gave "El Burlador" an heroic stature from the start, and helped to propagate his legend.

And the legend began under the best possible circumstances. The literary Don Juan was born during the reign of Philip IV of Spain: a period in which the Renaissance had attained, in the Spanish Court, a maximum of creative impetus. It was the era of Lope de Vega, Calderon, Tirso de Molina, Alarcón, Quevedo, Góngora, Gracián—a greater profusion of genius than had ever flourished in any other country at any one time. But the same impetus had also produced an unparalleled corruption of morals. Hume was perhaps exaggerating, but he was not very far from the truth, when he said that the immorality of the Court of Philip IV and Isabel of Bourbon could be compared with nothing except the biblical cities which earned God's consuming fire. In such an atmosphere of intellect and corruption, Don Juan's appearance and his importance were both completely natural.

Now let us look for a possible model.

The pre-Don Juans. Tirso de Molina. Don Juan's presence was felt, more or less acutely, some years before he actually made his appearance. But he had not yet found the creative hand which would give him his ultimate form. The outline of the pre-Don Juan is apparent in the works I have already mentioned: in *El Infamador* by Juan de la Cueva, and *La Fianza Satisfecha* by Lope de Vega. Both dramatists, particularly Lope, glimpsed Don Juan, but failed to realize him. And at last there emerged a man capable of making Don Juan into a human archetype. He was Fra Gabriel Tellez, known to literature as Tirso de Molina. Tirso de Molina was inferior to Lope de Vega in creative power and inspiration, inferior to Cal-

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deron in depth, but superior to both in direct observation of the human passions, and above all, those of women. His work is full of remarkable characterizations of women. Don Juan belongs in the series, partly because of his equivocal sexuality, but mainly because his character has no shape of its own, but is delineated by the women who surround him. Take them away and Don Juan would vanish. Which is why it took a great expert on the feminine soul to create the soul of Don Juan.

It has been said that Tirso de Molina acquired this knowledge in the confessional. This cannot be true. The confessional could provide him with nothing more than anecdotes, for as far as the biology of the soul is concerned, that is all that sins are. Tirso learned the deep lesson of life on his travels around Spain and America, during his sojourns at the Court and in Toledo (which was a suburb of Madrid), and above all, in his dealings with theatrical people, who were addicted to all the courtly passions, which reached the ears of the Father Confessors only as expurgated echoes. If it is true that Tirso was a natural son of the Duke of Osuna, he may have inherited much of his shrewdness from that great lord, the exalted Viceroy of Naples, in love with power and pleasure, and himself one of the most interesting figures of the Spanish Renaissance.

It was the school of humanity from which Tirso learned so much, and in which we must look for the origins of the legend of Don Juan; not in the old chronicles, not in the genealogy of the name Tenorio, as the scholars of the nineteenth century supposed.

The name Don Juan Tenorio, which has led scholars a long way off the track, has no historical significance whatever. There have always been Spaniards named Tenorio. Some of them, no doubt, had reputations which were not exactly edifying. Some may have been local Don Juans, or at least habitués of gambling houses and brothels, but none ever acquired the proportions of a myth. One of them, for example, a certain Cristobal Tenorio, an authentic Don Juan, and a contemporary of Tirso de Molina's, seduced and abducted Lope de Vega's daughter, as Amezúa has pointed out, fatally wounding the Phoenix of Geniuses.

Tirso de Molina did not have any particular Tenorio in mind when he wrote his play. He probably chose the name at random. But like all the creations of genius, it had a profound significance

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which contributed to the legendary nature of his hero. There is a proverb which says "Things are not made by their names." But, of course, they are. Many things exist because of their names. The Don Juan who was to be the epitome of a whole kind of masculinity, could not be called Enrico or Leonidio, like any of his half-realized ancestors. In order to become a symbol he had to be called Juan Tenorio: Juan, the name that evokes, however sacrilegiously, the sweet and visionary disciple whom women loved, and who loved to be near them. And Tenorio, which connotes *"tener,"* to possess, and also *"tenor,"* the man with the sexually equivocal voice, whose notes fly upward in the nocturnal serenade like so many poisoned arrows. Scarcely any of the playwrights or poets who have created new versions of "El Burlador" have dared to change that unchangeable name. Don Juan owes a great deal of his personality to the fact that his name is Don Juan Tenorio.

Very well then, if it was no flesh and blood gentleman named Tenorio who inspired Tirso, who was it?

Villamediana. A donjuanesque life. It would be easy enough to cite donjuanesque characters and incidents which must have passed before the friar's keen eyes, in the decadent Madrid of the seventeenth century, during the years when his creation of Don Juan was taking shape. But Don Juan's most characteristic, most salient features, have most in common with those of the Count of Villamediana, who was the ornament and scandal of the Court, and who for many years held the attention of Spaniards, especially of Spanish women. One cannot believe that the details of the Count's life, which was so typically donjuanesque, and created so strong a general impression, would have had no effect upon Tirso de Molina's avid sensibility. The culmination of Villamediana's life took place in the year 1622, and Tirso supposedly wrote his play sometime before 1630. So the notion that Villamediana's life may have influenced him is chronologically tenable.

I will mention merely the donjuanesque elements of this man's remarkable life. Villamediana was a typical nobleman of the Spanish Renaissance. Bold, witty, a man of great personal charm, and fundamentally immoral. Both his bearing and his good looks won the admiration of his contemporaries. Many years after the Count's

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death, Bertaut and other travelers to Spain still heard tales of his seductive fascination, which must have been extraordinary. One of these travelers was told, by an elderly but still handsome noblewoman who had known the Count in her youth, that "physically and mentally he was the peerless model of a gentleman. His memory will live forever in the hearts of lovers." This is the way women usually speak of their worst enemy.

His father was a great man at Court, and Villamediana traveled a great deal. From early childhood onward, he figured in the great court pageants, where the magnificence and elegance of his dress caused a considerable sensation. All Spain talked of the youth who appeared in the royal processions riding a white horse covered with silver and gold, and looking like a fairy-tale prince. Reading the contemporary descriptions, one can imagine the women gazing from their balconies at this dazzling gallant, and sighing. Up until the end of his life he loved to create a stir with his fantastic attire and his uninhibited behavior. According to the legend, his recklessness cost him his life.

Like many Don Juans, Villamediana was an impassioned gambler. He would ruin his best friends at the gambling table, or else be left penniless and debt-ridden himself. Like "El Burlador," he was banished by the King, and fled to Italy, where his elegance and his reckless cynicism dazzled everyone. He lived for a while in Andalusia. And, to complete the likeness, his name was Juan: Don Juan de Tassis; which is not too far from Don Juan Tenorio.

Villamediana was an excellent lyric poet, though his adventures have overshadowed his poems. In those days a fine sonnet would soften the heart of a woman more effectively than any jewels. So one may imagine that his exceptional talent, along with his handsome face, and the baroque elegance of his clothes must have stood him in good stead in his love affairs. Moreover, he was completely without fear. He could affirm his rights, or his whims, with the sword. And most important of all, he had no rival, among the courtiers of his time, in the art of bullfighting, as it was then practiced: riding into the sun-drenched arena, and pitting his skill and daring against the terrible bulls of Jarama. King, Queen, the whole Court, and the populace followed him with their eyes, and he tasted all the pleasures of glory, as one might savor a bitter and luscious fruit.

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His biography, then, resembles Don Juan's. But its donjuanesque flavor is most pronounced in his love affairs. Villamediana married while very young. It was a marriage of social convenience. His wife was an insignificant lady to whom he paid no further attention. Her name does not figure in any of the other episodes of his life. The earth might have swallowed her up, as she walked out of church after her wedding.

He had innumerable love affairs with women of all ages and classes. All were sterile, all more or less brief; none of them gave rise to any lasting tenderness. Just the sort of aggressive conquests which characterize Don Juan. We know he brutally assaulted one of his mistresses, in a carriage. The only one of them whom he treated with affectionate devotion was Doña Francisca de Tavara, the last of them all. We can now decipher the real significance of his exceptional romance with her, and it provides us with the solution to several of the enigmas of his psychology and his death.

Doña Francisca does not figure at all among Villamediana's legendary love affairs. The Count's supreme amorous exploit, the one which made him universally famous, was his suspected affair with the Queen, Doña Isabela de Bourbon. Posterity persists in regarding Doña Isabela as the love of his life. Yet, in spite of the mystery which always obscures what really passes between men and women, we can positively say that their liaison existed solely in the popular imagination. It was a figment which the Count himself encouraged.

Doña Isabela, the daughter of Henry IV, was surely one of the most interesting women of that period, both as a queen and as a person. She has claims of her own to historical consideration. She was extremely beautiful, with dark pensive eyes and a wide sensuous mouth. She was exceptionally charming and attractive, and combined the *esprit* of her native France with the Spanish graces which she quickly learned. In fact, a perfect heroine for all sorts of adventures and stories. And Isabela carried gaiety and frivolity as far as was permissible, but never any further. She inherited the talents and charm of her father, the great king of France, but not his amorous disposition. Her virtue, amid the general licentiousness of Madrid, in a home where the king had a new mistress nearly every day, was like a pearl in the mud.

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Despite the Queen's propriety, and the unwavering love which she felt for King Philip until his death, the legend of her love affair with Villamediana, which travelers, especially French, carried all over the world, has survived the passage of time, and served as the plot for innumerable dramas, novels, and ballads. What truth is there in the legend? Perhaps the Queen's frivolity and gaiety were more apparent when she was in the company of that lively and poetic gallant, whom she met constantly, since he served her as confidential courier. Yet we can be certain that it was nothing more than a flirtation.

There is no doubt in my mind that it was Villamediana himself who, prompted by that irresistible love of scandal which typifies the donjuanesque personality, started the rumors about his royal love affair. Thus the legend was created by Villamediana himself, and it is easy now to work out the mechanism of the intrigue.

We know for a fact that the person to whom the Count was paying court was not the Queen but one of her ladies-in-waiting, the aforementioned Doña Francisca de Tavara. And she, in turn, was the King's mistress. Villamediana, then, was the King's rival, not in the affections of the irreproachable Queen, but in those of the wanton Doña Francisca, a young, extremely beautiful Portuguese lady. The Count's aspirations were indeed high. His "love was royal," but not legitimately so. Scholars have managed to work out the pun. But they have not noticed the obvious fact that it was purposely invented by Villamediana to plume his donjuanesque vanity. When the Count went out to fight a bull, in the main square of Madrid, during a royal celebration, wearing on his hat the famous motto "my love is royal," he was referring not to Doña Isabela but to Doña Francisca, who was also a royal love. It was a clever pun; it has fooled everyone since. The love poems which he dedicated to a lady called "Francelisa" are similarly misleading. "Francelisa" is a double anagram. It may mean "the Frenchwoman," that is, the Queen, and this is how it was understood by contemporaries. But it also means "Francisca," the Portuguese lady. He hinted everything, and at the same time made sure that nothing could be proved against him. He probably spent many enjoyable hours at this malicious game.

But the most striking part has yet to be told. As far as the

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mythology of love is concerned, the disclosure I am about to make is rather sensational. It was discovered fairly recently, in the archives of Simancas, by the excellent Spanish historian, Alonso Cortés. Villamediana, the dashing and reckless poet, supposedly the lover of Spain's most charming Queen, the man whose escapades and whose profligacy fascinated all the women of his time, the author of some of the most beautiful sonnets the Spanish muses ever dedicated to a woman—this great romantic hero was far, oh very far, from being a paragon of masculinity. Documents have been found which show conclusively that Villamediana was implicated in a trial for what in those days was referred to as "the abominable sin." The trial was held in 1622. Many well-known personages in Madrid were convicted of homosexuality. The list included the hangers-on, the servants, and the masters, of great houses. It also included Don Juan de Tassis. For the first time the name of Villamediana occurs without being linked with that of a woman. Who would have suspected him? Yet he was the leader of the group. The commoners were condemned to death, and executed in Madrid, in accordance with the misguided rigor of the law in those days. The titled offenders were permitted to flee to France or Italy. Villamediana had just been murdered; it was his death which had led to the discovery of the unsuspected ring of homosexuals. But his honor was spared. The King himself, in a pious ordinance which has only recently come to light, commanded that "whatever may be known against him be kept secret, now that he is dead, so as not to defile his memory."

It has taken three centuries to uncover the terrible secret whose murky reality defaces one of love's romantic legends. The legend attributes the cause of the Count of Villamediana's death to the King, who, it says, was enraged by the motto "my love is royal," and revenged the impertinence. Distinguished poets repeated this version, in poems which many people still know by heart. The most famous of all is the ten-line stanza, which has been attributed to Góngora, Quevedo, and Lope de Vega, which begins,

Scandalmonger of Madrid,
Tell me, who killed the Count?

and ends,

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But the truth of the matter is
That Bellido killed him,
But the King gave the word.

Nobody doubted the poets' version of the tragedy. The Spanish people accepted it, and still do, as an article of faith. The following stanza, alluding to the murder of the unfortunate lover, is a variant of a Spanish original, and was found by G. Bayo among the singers of La Plata.

They have killed Cupid
Behind a carriage.
Who sent Cupid
Out into the dark?

Poor Cupid! He was up to worse things than being out in the dark. Once again the poets were mistaken. They are nearly always mistaken when they listen too closely to the rumors in the street. King Philip IV was a gay, kindly man. We have a fairly intimate picture of him, in his correspondence with Sister Maria de Agreda. And there is nothing that we know about him which might lead us to suspect that he was the instigator of the murder. On the contrary, as we have just seen, the King charitably hushed up his rival's disgrace.

Tirso de Molina, therefore, had before his very eyes a perfect model for his Don Juan. A Don Juan with all his glories, and with all his miseries, including the final one. Neither I nor anyone else can claim that he was making a direct copy when he wrote *El Burlador*. I do not wish to quarrel with the scholars. But I do say that these typically donjuanesque events could not fail to make an impression on the sensibility of that great dramatist and keen judge of humanity, and that they must have contributed, therefore, to the creation of his immortal character. In the last analysis, if I were driven to say who was the first real-life Don Juan, I should not hesitate to name Villamediana.

Don Juan's pardon. This, then, is my interpretation of Don Juan and his legend: his attitude to love implies an indeterminate sexuality rather than the proverbial notion of him as the

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superb male, although the latter notion has been glorified for centuries in a literature nourished with glittering appearances, but not always with human realities.

And, whatever has been said, Don Juan is not a Spanish prototype. He has no connection whatever with the most deeply typical sexual attitudes of our race. Don Juan is not a Spanish, and still less an Andalusian, creation. He was brought to Spain from other European countries, by the rejuvenating but cynical whirlwind of the Renaissance. If the Don Juan of literary mythology was born in Spain, it was because the fecundity of Spanish genius coincided, in that century, with a profound decadence of national morals.

Because the legend came to birth in Spain, it was linked, from the start, with typically Iberian religious and funereal elements, which were the immediate cause of its widespread success. But the image of "El Burlador" was soon stripped of these local and ephemeral elements, and became one of the universal and eternal myths of love.

Finally, it is probable that the living model who inspired Tirso de Molina to write his drama was the Count of Villamediana, whom the great friar knew well, and whose life exactly paralleled that of "El Burlador."

The Don Juan of the drama has been forgiven, as the King forgave the Count. In Tirso de Molina's version, and in its successors for two hundred years, an implacable Providence condemned him to eternal fire. This was what prevented him from becoming a completely popular myth. The people love the great scoundrel and do not want him to be condemned. Zorilla, whose Don Juan parades his heroic madness in immortal verse, on the stage, every year on All Souls Day, wrought the change which was to fix Don Juan forever in the popular imagination. At the last moment, when only one grain of sand is left in the seducer's hourglass, Doña Inés, through her celestial innocence, wrests the sinner from Hell and restores him to eternal grace.

Very well; we meddlesome professors must not be outdone by kings and poets. Let us say, with the rest of them, "May he rest in peace!"

(*Translated from the Spanish by F. L. Ganivet*)

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POEMS

SCIENCE AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

for B. F. Skinner

Feeling that it is vaguely undignified
To win someone else's bet for him by choosing
The quiet girl in the corner, not refusing,
But simply not preferring the other one;
Abashed by having it known that we decide
To save the icing on the chocolate bun
Until the last, that we prefer to ride
Next to the window always; more than afraid
Of knowing that They Know what sends us screaming
Out of the movie; even shocked by the dreaming
Our friends do about us, we vainly hope
That certain predictions never can be made,
That the mind can never spin the Golden Rope
By which we feel bound, determined and betrayed.

But rather, if such a thing exists at all
Three nasty thingummies should hold it, twisting
Strand onto endless strand, always resisting
Our own old impulse to pull the string and see
Just what would happen, or to feel the small
But tingling tug upon the line; to free
The captives, so that we might watch them crawl
Back into deeper water again. It is well
To leave such matters in their power, trusting
To the blasé discretion of disgusting
Things like the Two who spin and measure, and
The Third and surely The Most Horrible,

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Whom we'd best forget, within whose bony hand
Lies crumpled the Secret she will never tell.

Which secret concerns the nature of The String
That all Three tend, and whether it be the wire
Designed to receive the message, or to fire
The tiny initial relay. In the end,
The question is whether merely Determining
Or really Knowing is what we most pretend
To honor because it seems most frightening
And worship because we hold it most to blame.
I once saw Dr. Johnson in a vision;
His hat was in his hand, and a decision
Of import on his lips. "There is," he said,
"Free Will, and there's an end on't." All the same,
Atropos and her sisters, overhead,
Grinned at this invocation of their name.

John Hollander

SHE WEPT, SHE RAILED

She wept, she railed, she spurned the meat
Men toss into a muslin cage
To make their spineless doxy bleat
For pleasure and for patronage,
As if she had no choice but eat
The lewd bait of a squalid age.

That moment when the lights go out
The years shape to the sprawling thing,
A marmoset with bloodied clout,
A pampered flank that learns to sing,
Without the grace, she cried, to doubt
The postures of the underling.

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I thought of Judith in her tent,
Of Helen by the crackling wall,
Of Cressida, her bone-lust spent,
Of Catharine on the holy wheel:
I heard their woman-dust lament
The golden wound that does not heal.

What a wild air her small joints beat!
I leaned, I poured the raging wine
Until our bodies filled with light,
Mine with hers and hers with mine,
And we went soaring through the night
Where all the constellations shine.

Stanley Kunitz

AFRICAN VIOLETS

Neither obvious grave nor shallow light
Defend you, nor this most bitter pasture
Arrange another landscape for your going,
Who have been gentle. A house, strict as wind,
For your asylum, a stone for your horizon,
And for living hands these thick-leaved
Perishable violets grown through silence
Like the moss. Obedient you move, a servant
In the shades of madness where they bloom,
Crying out across the darkening years
To your lost daughter who cannot, like
Persephone, come back through shadows.
Distracted by bird or snake you kneel at dusk
In the terrible garden—a whole moon withered
In your hair and your skin drawn back like
An eyelid from a face neither blind nor young.

Patricia Coombs

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PERSEPHONE PAUSES

The lengthened shadow of my hand
Holding a letter from a friend
Tells time: the sun descends again.
So long, so late the light has shone.
Since rising, we have shone with ease:
Perhaps not happiness, but still
A certain comfort from the trees
Whose crests of leaves droop down in tiers,
Their warm trunks veiled by aspen hair,
Their honeyed limbs, the loosened earth
About the roots; while flowers recline
In dusty gardens, rest on weeds,
Those emblems of a passing year.

So be it! As I turn, my train
Is plucked by spikes of summer grass.
No clutch of summer holds me here.
I know, I know. I've gone before.
I glance to my accustomed glass,
The shallow pond, but films of slime
Waver across it, suck the verge
Where blunted marsh frond cuts the air.
But as I stare, the slime divides
Like curtains of old green velour:

I gaze into my gaze once more,
Still veiled in foam. But then, the grim
Tragedian from the other shore
Draws near my shade. Beneath the brim,
In motions formal and austere
We circle, measure, heel to hem.
He proffers me an iron plate
Of seedy fruit, to match my mouth.
My form encased in some dark stuff
He has bedizened, keeps me hid

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Save for that quivering oval, turned
Half-moon, away, away from him
And that excitement of his taste
He suffers, from my flesh withdrawn.

But this unwilling touch of lust
Has moved some gentle part of me
That sleeps in solstice, wakes to dream
Where streams of light and winter join.
He knows me then; I only know
A darkened cheek, a sidelong lower,
My nerves dissolving in the gleam
Of night's theatrical desire,
As always, when antagonists
Are cast into the sensual
Abysses, from a failing will.
This is my dolor, and my dower.

Come then, sweet Hell! I'll name you once
To stir the grasses, rock the pool,
And move the leaves before they fall.
I cast my letter to the breeze
Where paper wings will sprout, and bear
It on to that high messenger
Of sky, who lately dropped it here,
Reminding me, as I decline
That half my life is spent in light.
I cast my spirit to the air,
But cast it. Summertime, goodnight!

Carolyn Kizer

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Ursula Brumm

THE FIGURE OF CHRIST IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The literature of recent years has given us some impressive reincarnations of the great figures of legend and history. Most conspicuous among them, apart from the heroes of Greek mythology invoked in the modern French drama, are Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus and the twentieth-century Christ of William Faulkner's *A Fable*.

This curious phenomenon inevitably recalls us to the much-debated problem of tradition. Is the modern writer free to choose his models from the whole range of world literature; or does he follow, willy-nilly, a tradition, not necessarily the central one, of the literature he is part of? Thomas Mann, who re-worked some of the leading themes of German literature, points in the latter direction. Faulkner is a somewhat different case. At first glance it might seem strange indeed that a contemporary American novelist should write about Christ in modern disguise, but then we remember that in his earlier works too Faulkner had projected the image of Christ, if only as a shadow cast by his figures, and that other American writers, such as Melville, have done the same. This observation leads us back from the Corporal of *A Fable* deep into Faulkner's work and, in fact, deep into the national literary tradition. We discover a remarkable though neglected phenomenon: the presence and metamorphoses of the Christ figure in American literature and its importance for the American literary imagination.

Faulkner has long been preoccupied with the person and life of Christ. It has been pointed out that *The Sound and the Fury* is constructed on the chronology of passion week in the year 1928 (though not identified as such by the author, who gives us no more than the bare dates); three of its four chapters take place on Good

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Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Joe Christmas of *Light in August,* the man with the invisible "cross" of Negro blood in his veins, is named Joseph. "It is so in the Book: Christmas, the son of Joe," and his name becomes "somehow an augur of what he will do." At each stage in his life, in one way or another, he is violated, wronged, whipped, until he ends his life in striking analogy to that of Christ, being at the time of his death the same age as Christ at his crucifixion; Faulkner makes much of it. Christmas is persecuted, captured and slaughtered on a Friday, achieving in the end something like a glorification and even a spiritual resurrection:

He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. Again from the town, deadened a little, by the wall, the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing.

As Faulkner progresses in his work, his heroes—those who have his real sympathy—become more and more like Christ. For Faulkner the drama of Christ becomes the human drama as such. The most admirable of his characters, Isaac McCaslin of *The Bear,* imitates Christ not only in death but in his life too; he intentionally follows his example. McCaslin renounces his property, stained by guilt and greed, and buys himself carpenter's tools in order to be able to live in utmost simplicity: "Not in mere static and hopeful emulation of the Nazarene as the young gambler buys a spotted shirt because the old gambler won in one yesterday, but . . . because if the Nazarene had found carpentering good for the life and the ends He had assumed and elected to serve, it would be all right too for Isaac

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McCaslin." The next "incarnation" is, inevitably, the Corporal of *A Fable,* who in the bloody conflicts of our time relives the life and sacrifice of Christ, dying in the futile attempt to stop the carnage of the First World War.

But Christ as a heroic model is not a curious obsession of Faulkner alone. His Corporal was preceded by another, although in this case a bitterly satirical, portrait of a present-day Christ, Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts.* This tabloid advisor to the lovelorn and distressed is weighed down by the misery of his clients and, bungling his impossible mission, he fails to fulfill the image of Christ and is shot by a desperate and misguided member of his flock. Further, we have allusions to Christ in two other modern novels: in Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* in the death of old Grant, and in the shooting and burial of Tod Clifton in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man.* And in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea,* the old man's suffering is crowned by an analogy with Christ's passion. The unlucky fisherman, returning from his battle with the sharks, beaten but not defeated, carries home the mast of his ship, falling down repeatedly with the burden across his shoulders. In his shack he lies face down on his bed with his arms out straight and the palms of his lacerated hands up. In this position he is discovered by his friend, the young boy, who runs crying to tell others what he has seen.

The presence of and analogies to Christ in the work of Herman Melville have been noted by many critics, and related to his extensive use of symbolism. There is symbolism of this sort in *Moby Dick* and, as Richard Chase maintains, under the surface in *Pierre.* In Melville's last work, *Billy Budd,* the figure of Christ emerges into full light. Billy Budd, a "martyr to martial discipline," is completely innocent, a "young Adam before the Fall" who cannot even comprehend the thought of salvation or a savior nor that of law or sin. In his sacrificial death he is transformed into a Christ figure. His hanging, like the crucifixion, is attended by cosmic responses: there is the strange sound of a sudden and distant tropical rain, which "seemed to indicate some capricious revulsion of thought or feeling such as mobs ashore are liable to, in the present instance possibly a sullen revocation on the men's part in their involuntary echoing of Billy's benediction," and later the sea fowl swoop down toward the ship, in strange agitation. The sailors look with reverence on the

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spar from which Billy Budd was suspended; "To them, a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross."

This seems at first sight a rather haphazard selection of American novels, by six such different and apparently unconnected writers as Faulkner, West, Ellison, Wolfe, Hemingway and Melville. Yet their works are comparable. They have, for one thing, a common denominator in their tragic quality, thus raising the question of the tragic elements in American literature, or, for that matter, in any democratic literature. This also brings us back to the question of tradition, in which tragedy is surely a factor. And while the controversy about tradition, or the lack of it, and about its advantages or disadvantages, continues in American literary criticism, it is worth pointing out that the determining forces of American literature differ from those of Europe, and particularly from those at work in solidly institutionalized England. In America these forces appear not so much in the form of authoritatively preserved social laws and customs, made concrete and visible in décor and etiquette, as in the form (or formlessness) of modes of thought and imagination that occur and recur in American cultural history. The figure of Christ is an element of this imaginative tradition, and we shall try to discover its function and meaning by tracing its role in American cultural history.

II

The role of Christ in the American tradition has been varied and dramatic; he has been by turns the suppressed savior, a rebel, and a liberator. In the middle of the nineteenth century we encounter him as the opponent of the Calvinist minister, God's representative in New England. Among the Puritans Christ occupied a humble position, strikingly different from his role among other Protestants as well as among Catholics. Puritanism was primarily an Old Testament creed, and its dominant doctrine of limited atonement severely restricted the rank and efficacy of Christ. He was then the prince in beggar's garb, but, like the hero of the legend, he finally emerged from neglect and suppression to assume his rightful mission of liberation and redemption. As strict Calvinism declined, Christ's stature increased; and for those who quarrelled with Puritan doctrine

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in general, or with predestination in particular, he emerged as the redeemer in his true New Testament vocation.

This revolution in religious thought found its expression in one of the best novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, published in 1859. As a young girl Harriet Beecher was steeped in Calvinist theology, and at the age of eleven she came to doubt the doctrine of predestination and damnation when a friend, the fiancé of her elder sister, was drowned in a shipwreck. She presents the same problem in her novel: the lover of the young heroine is believed to be lost at sea, and his mother is on the brink of madness with fear that her son, who had not yet affirmed his faith, has been consigned to hellfire and eternal damnation. In this calamity it is the uneducated but deeply religious Negro servant Candace who stands up to the learned minister, the representative of Calvinist theology, and defeats him. Her advocate is Christ. She says to her mistress:

"I know our Doctor's a mighty good man, an' larned,—an' in fair weather I hain't no 'bjection to yer hearing all about dese yer great and mighty tings 's got to say. But honey, dey won't do for you now; sick folks mu'n't hab strong meat: an' times like dese, dar just ain't but one ting to come to, an' dat ar's Jesus." . . . "Why Jesus didn't die for notin',—all dat love ain't gwone to be wasted. De 'lect is more 'n you or I knows, honey! Dar's de Spirit,—He'll give it to 'em and ef Mass'r James is called an' took, depend upon it de Lord has got him ready—course He has: so don't ye go to laying on your poor heart what no mortal creature can live under, 'cause as we 's got to live in dis yer world, it's quite clar de Lord ha' fixed it so we can, and ef tings was as some folks suppose, why we couldn't live, and dar wouldn't be no sense in anyting dat goes on."

The way for an even wider function of Christ was prepared by the Unitarian movement and completed by Emerson and the transcendentalists, who transformed the Son of God into a figure almost entirely human. To Emerson, Christ becomes the supreme witness of man's divinity:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished by its beauty, he lived in it, had its being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man. One was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes

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forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of divine emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou thinkest as I now think."

As it turned out, the divinity of man demanded the humanity of Christ. Two years later, Theodore Parker, in his famous sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," completed the transformation:

If you make him a God, the son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense, much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit, his love no feeling, his cross no burden, his agony no pain. His death is an illusion. . . . Then his resignation is no lesson, his life no model, his death no triumph to you or me, who are not gods, but mortal men, that know not what a day shall bring forth, and walk by faith "dim sounding on our perilous way."

Thus, in America the secularization of culture finds a focus in the humanization of Christ. In these words a revolutionary shift of perspective is evident; an independent value is now placed on secular human life, to which Christ is related with naive selfishness: he must be human if his suffering and sacrifice are to have any meaning to us. Parker gives the first candid expression of the desire to use Christ as a human paragon, yet he as well as Emerson also express in their writings the dominant mood of their time. Christ is "our brother; the son of man, as we are, the Son of God, like ourselves." "There was never an age, when men did not crucify the Son of God afresh," says Parker at another point, and this is precisely the idea informing the fate of Pierre, Billy Budd, of Joe Christmas and the Corporal. While Emerson, Parker, and the transcendentalists linked the idea of the divinity of man to the supreme humanity of Christ, they suggested that the two served each other symbolically. Man in his divine nature calls for the testimony of Christ; and the sacrifice of Christ is only redeemed when man in his suffering is consoled and elevated by its example. In other words, Christ had become peculiarly suitable for literary appropriation; his new metamorphosis really demanded it, as a proof of his service to man. This service consists, as we have seen in the examples given above, in lending glory and the assurance of transcendence to man in his last suffering and his death,

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otherwise futile. In a secular age, Christ had become the symbol of man's immortality.

Actually, the humanization of Christ had been foreshadowed in his Calvinist role as "second Adam." To understand this, we must remember that the Puritans had continued, if only in a limited way, a peculiar line of medieval thought: the typological or figural interpretation of the Bible, according to which persons and events of the Old Testament were held to mean and, in a very real sense, to prefigure those of the New Testament, notably Christ. Typology thus is a system of parallels, and the American Puritan's favorite parallel was that of Adam and Christ. It was the most frequently and most carefully worked-out analogy, because it bore on the story of the fall of man and on the Puritan conception of human salvation, which was seen as a drama in three acts, marked by the encounters of Adam and Satan, Satan and Christ, and by Satan's final overthrow by Christ. Thus in the American tradition Christ from the beginning was seen as closely linked to man struggling with evil; in his role as "second Adam" he was more a divine brother to humanity, and a symbol of human salvation, than a member of the holy trinity. Thus a union was established foreshadowing the humanization of Christ by Emerson as well as the later appearances of Christ in American literature as the other, immortal incarnation of man. In his recent study, *The American Adam,* R.W.B. Lewis has traced the influence of this model in the writings of such different authors as Charles Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Holmes, and others.

III

On a purely aesthetic level, the appearance of Christ in the American novel is part of the modern movement of symbolism, which, in America as well as in Europe, must be considered the dominant creative mood of the past hundred years. Symbolism is now also the canon of criticism. The symbolic structure of a work of art, as it has been defined by modern criticism, consists of a number of essentially spontaneous and autonomous elements, which, precisely because of their independence and slight incongruity, gain the power of infinite suggestion. The use of the Christ figure is related to this dominant form of symbolism, but is an essentially independent crea-

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tive technique. The symbol is an exact reference to something indefinite, to a suggested line of thought and feeling which defies precise statement and thus points toward the infinite, while the Christ figure is employed to give a definite, though transcendent, meaning to the profusion and often chaotic complexity of life, which otherwise would be incomprehensible, or in danger of a nihilistic interpretation. It is symbolism in a reverse direction, pointing away from the indeterminate fullness of life toward the definite meaning contained in the person of Christ. Further, it differs from ordinary symbolism, as well as from myth, in that it still preserves the vestiges of a precise historic content. The dates and happenings of the passion, the event of the crucifixion, the age of Christ, all of which are used in literature to establish the analogy, are data which point toward a unique event in history. At the same time, they stand for the abstract ideal of the divine nature of man. But, unlike myth, one cannot manipulate the form and content of the Christ figure; it stands as a great and ideal invariable behind the infinite variation of human suffering. It always points toward the ideal.

This literary technique, which, through a bond of identical significance, joins the ultimate fate of the fictional hero to that of Christ, bears a surprising resemblance to the old practice of typology, which also established a supernatural link of identity between Christ and another person. Erich Auerbach, who has devoted a great deal of attention to the influence of typology on Dante and on early European literature, defines the typological or "figural" interpretation as establishing "a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality." In a comparable way, our fictional heroes are shown to fulfill the passion of Christ, while Christ signifies not only his own individual fate but that of all humanity. However, this resemblance is not necessarily a result of any direct influence or tradition; it may derive simply from the inescapable significance inherent in the person, and particularly in the death, of Christ. His crucifixion is a symbol by definition: it has been suffered for the salvation of mankind and thereby establishes a tie to every human being.

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Other literatures besides the American, notably the Russian, have humanized and animated the person of Christ, though in altogether different ways determined by their own cultural traditions. Among the Russians it is most often the perfect, the entirely good or entirely selfless man, who finds his supreme ideal in Christ. In American literature, Christ has become an emblem for the man who suffers in spite, or perhaps because, of his innocence. He thus serves a special function, resulting from the curious predicament in which the tragic hero finds himself in America.

To speak of the "tragic American hero" implies a paradox. Is there, or can there be, true tragic feeling, candidly confessed, in American literature? Does the American writer regard tragic experience as an unavoidable and necessary part of life? The answer, to all appearances, is no; and this is what fundamentally distinguishes the American from many European writers. The acceptance of tragic experience poses a crucial problem for an affirmatively democratic literature, and in American writing has resulted in a curiously twisted state of affairs which calls for a redeemer such as appears in the figure of Christ. Basically—and this is grossly simplified for the purposes of demonstration—the American hero is the essentially innocent man, the new Adam of the New World, living within the best of conceivable societies, a society he himself has made according to his ideals, intent on the pursuit of some sort of happiness and assured in his belief that happiness is what he has a right to expect.

There can, of course, be something wrong with society; it is possible for it to fall short of its ideals and expose the hero to suffering. That happened in the later course of the nineteenth century, and the resulting complications were vigorously exploited by the naturalistic and social-critical writers. Henry James explored another possibility by sending his innocent heroes, or heroines, to old and evil Europe in order to involve them in tragic or nearly tragic experience, even if only as its innocent victims. But the novelists we are here concerned with discharge their task on another level of experience. They present the essentially innocent man who meets an inexplicable and irredeemable adversity ("irredeemable" and "irremediable" are favorite words of Faulkner) in the very condition of life—an evil exceeding any social ill and something for which nothing in the man's view of life has prepared him. In that sense Billy Budd is really the prototype

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of the Puritan tragic hero: the innocent man encountering evil "for which the creator alone is responsible"—because he is the all-sufficient God of Calvinism. Billy Budd is wholly without that share in human failing which for the Greek hero is a requirement of his tragic consummation. This is also mainly true of Pierre, and even of Joe Christmas, who is really the fundamentally innocent man who all his life is viciously prevented from being innocent, and whose only response to that persistent evil of life is therefore permanent outrage, finally culminating in the murder of the liberal, Negrophile Miss Burden. Not only the evil men but also the good are really the adversaries of the truly innocent; this is a note already sounded in *Billy Budd.*

In this fateful encounter with evil it is the hero's stern conviction of his own innocence which gives poignancy, even violence, to the contest; and it is often precisely this innocence which prevents the acceptance, and thereby transcendence, of his fate. This, at any rate, seems to be the predicament of many of the more frenzied heroes of American literature, and it accounts for the tremendous impact emanating from such immaculate violence, as well as for a certain sterility. Violence becomes an end in itself, it can point to nothing beyond its own rage. It is outraged and implacable innocence, converted into cruelty, which creates the perverted Christ figures of American literature, like the Quaker Nick of the Woods, who marks his Indian victims with a bloody cross; or the violated Ahab, who baptizes *in nomine diaboli,* pursuing evil with a self-destructive, holy madness.

If the tragic constitutes the highest non-religious dignity to be conferred on man in his earthly struggles, it paradoxically requires him to be not entirely innocent in order to earn the distinction. Only if resigned to the fact that neither man nor life are perfect, is he able to transcend his fall, for which he accepts responsibility and punishment. This is the price he must pay for not being defeated in defeat. The innocent man, however, has no resources in defeat; he does not deserve defeat and feels that he should not be defeated. This plight is one for which his belief provides no explanation. It is into this dilemma that Christ steps, not primarily as the Son of God, but as the supreme example of innocence made to suffer, persecuted and crucified. His suffering is God-imposed and therefore sanctified; it needs no explanation. It is also made meaningful by

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the idea of the brotherhood of suffering men. Christ's image, superimposed on the luckless American Adam, gives him a benediction which he could never attain by himself. Prefigured in Puritan thought, the novelistic Christ comes now as the fulfiller of Adam's fate.

Christ, the "hero of the lowest station," is summoned when simple man, unlearned, suffering, wronged, the democratic hero, is defeated by adversity or evil, and he adds to the hero's downfall that radiance of victorious transcendence of fate which is a mark of tragedy. Santayana cites "glorification of life" in the face of defeat and death as the necessary requirement of tragic stature. This is a quality not often found in American writing. To some extent it is present in *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd,* and Hemingway has it in his best work and also in his *The Old Man and the Sea.* Even more than Melville and Hemingway, Faulkner's heroes in their grand doom need the summoned figure of Christ to lend them this "glorification of life" (or perhaps for them it is only a glorification of death) which they have buried deep in their hearts.

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PARIS LETTER

DIVISION OVER ALGERIA

"When an Empire begins to break up, the blame is ascribed indifferently to those who for too long refused to reform it and those who, by permitting reform, accelerated the course of events. The facts never decide the issue between the opposed theories." And since the facts never decide the issue, since every citizen belongs to one tendency or the other, this passage by Raymond Aron—taken from his latest book, *Espoir et Peur du Siècle*—expresses in a few words what sets Frenchmen one against the other.

Everyone knows that victory unites, defeat divides. It is when things go badly that the time comes for evening up old scores. In 1940, the men of the Left accused the Right of having demoralized France by making her indulgent toward the dictators. And the Right replied that it was paid vacations, corrupting reading, trade-unionism and anti-clericalism which had sapped the strength of the nation. Today, the Left affirms that France is losing her Empire because the Right refused to make indispensable reforms while there was still time to do so. The Right maintains that it is precisely these reforms, finally imposed by the Left, which are the source of our decadence. The reproaches, this time, on one side as on the other, are more weighty.

Who is right? Everybody and nobody, no doubt. For reforms should indeed have been made earlier, but they also would have led to the loss of the Empire. The only difference would have been that this purely negative operation would perhaps have cost less.

Yet it is not certain that even if matters had been handled in the wisest, the most economical and the speediest fashion, the results would not have been identical. It must be admitted, first of all, that it is easy to utter judgments today about what should have been done in the past, but it was less easy to do so then. Suppose that all reforms, in Indochina, in Algeria, in Tunisia, in Morocco, and in Black Africa, had been made, and been made in time. It still remains true that nothing is more painful nor more difficult than for a nation to pass in the hierarchy of powers from the first to the second rank. To be Switzerland is not humiliating. It is even highly honorable. But it is hard to become that when one has been something else.

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This is all the harder for France since she cannot even maintain the appearance of power. The United Kingdom possesses the A-bomb and very soon, perhaps, will have the H-bomb. This does not prevent her from having lost rank and from being each day more dependent on her American ally. But the United Kingdom enjoys a political system and machinery which, with her governmental stability, allows her the illusion of power. The case is the opposite with France, whose notorious instability and procession of Premiers prevents anyone from taking her quite seriously.

Nevertheless this instability is not the result of political frivolity. It is the faithful image of France and of the interests that oppose each other on her territory. Charles Moraze, in *Les Français et la République,* gives the clearest explanation for this. Three revolutions in less than a century, then three wars which ended, one with a defeat which destroyed nothing, the second with a victory which lost nearly everything, and the third with another victory which lost the rest, have left the body politic of France with exposed nerves. Regrettable as it may seem, everything in France is opposed to the two-party system. The multiplicity of French parties is the expression of the division, or more exactly the compartmentalization, of the nation, within her larger unity: the France of the iron founders stands arrayed against the France of the coal miners, the growers against the breeders, the regions of a single crop against the regions of multiple crops, expanding big industry against backward small business,

This division is natural to France, while at the same time the theme of union remains one of her dreams: national union, union of the Left, sacred union, national rallying. . . . What party, what politician, has not on one occasion or another called upon all citizens to rally about it, or him, in the name of some ideology or against ideologies? But it is precisely at the moment when a man or a party comes forward with the idea of rallying all France that the country divides most sharply. It is not alarming, to France, to see the voters split into some fifteen parties or groups. Contrary to what is the case in other nations, the situation becomes serious in France when the voters divide into two groups.

Everything indicates that we are on the eve of a development of this sort—or perhaps it has even come about already. True, one might have had the impression that France had split into two at the moment of the debate on the European Defense Community. In fact that was not true. Except for the professionals—politicians, journalists, soldiers, and economists—no one in France knew exactly what the EDC was. Today the question which is put is much simpler and strikes home to every

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one of us: Shall Algeria remain French or shall she not? If one were to answer that there are other, intermediate possibilities, one would not be understood. It would be necessary to relearn what has been taught in school. The conquest of 1830 was presented to French students in a certain fashion, one which laid more stress on Marshall Bugeaud than on General de Saint-Arnaud, more stress on the development of this land than on the methods that were used to master it. In complete good faith, four-fifths of France's citizens, who have never set foot in Africa, did not doubt in the least, two years ago, that our actions in Algeria had been both legitimate and to the advantage of Algeria herself.

Today everything has changed, in the sense that this certainty has been terribly shaken. But the question which remains—shall we stay in Algeria?—still arouses emotions which are all but fundamental. Thus only uncompromising answers are permissible. According to the attitude which one takes, not simply on, but even apropos of Algeria, one is classed willy-nilly with one side or the other—and the chasm between the two sides grows ever wider and deeper.

It is symptomatic that it is precisely over this problem that the unity of the students' organizations has recently been shattered. Since the Liberation, French students have been grouped within the UNEF (*Union Nationale des Etudiants de France*), which constituted a genuine trade union numbering 100,000 young people. On questions like the granting of scholarships, the management of various services (student restaurants, organized vacations, etc.), the UNEF has succeeded not only in being consulted but in participating in the operation of the responsible organizations. It is thus officially recognized by the State. The UNEF waged a campaign to have students made eligible for social security, though they are not wage earners. It demanded that they should receive a "pre-salary," and the present Minister of National Education, Millière, has satisfied this demand with the plan for a reform of education which he is now drafting. The UNEF is clearly a powerful organization. It constitutes associations of students in the various branches of instruction, grouped within general associations for each university city.

Last year a break within the UNEF was barely avoided over the relationship which the UNEF was to maintain with the UGMA (General Union of Algerian Moslem Students). This year, over a question of the same sort, the break could not be avoided.

What happened was this: The president and the officers of the UNEF protested a few weeks ago against the methods being used at

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present for the repression of the Algerian revolt. In so doing, they asserted that they were remaining faithful to the Charter of the organization which, although it demands that the UNEF should associate itself with no party, not only does not forbid it to assume positions on matters of principle, but even recommends that it do so. The president, M. de la Fournière, made reference to the fact that the UNEF had also protested strongly against demonstrations at the Sorbonne by students who had tried to prevent M. Jean Guitton from conducting his courses, on the pretext that he had been a Pétainist. In this case as in that, the UNEF took its stand not on any political credo, M. de la Fournière said, but on principles of freedom and of honor which it was its duty to defend, in the name of French students.

The attack against the present officers was led by M. Gautrot, representing the European students of Algiers. No concessions that were offered were sufficient to cause him to withdraw his opposition. That the UNEF *also* condemned the atrocities committed by the Algerian nationalists was not enough; he demanded that it condemn *only* those atrocities. In the end, the group supporting the present officers won, and 17 student associations, out of a total of about 60, left the UNEF.

Such is the present state of confusion. There is nothing astonishing about it. France, and especially the Right in France, is accustomed to such behavior. There was a time when to declare that Dreyfus was innocent, that the officers of the Council of War who condemned him were in error, was considered an insult to the army as a whole and, through the army, to France. Consequently to say that Dreyfus was innocent was to oppose or to betray France. To say today that there are in Algeria men who have used inadmissible methods is regarded in the same fashion. What a grave imprudence! The Dreyfus affair cost the army the respect of everyone for years. There is a danger that the blind obstinacy of the Right today may lead to consequences quite as excessive and quite as unjust.

The break in the youth organization seems more grave than the never-ending disputes of the Radical Party. The latter, shepherded by M. Mendès-France, has issued once again a severe condemnation of the government's policy. Once again, at the last moment, one of those "motions of synthesis" of which the party was so proud in Herriot's time, has permitted it simultaneously to deliver its verdict of "guilty"—and to permit the Radical ministers to continue to serve in the cabinet. To act otherwise would have meant a new split in the group and M. Mendès-France would have found himself at the head of a party which, by dint of exclusions and resignations, would no longer repre-

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sent anything except M. Mendès-France himself. This is indeed the tragedy of this statesman, perhaps the only statesman France possesses today: none of the existing political structures will ever be able to tolerate his personality nor to follow him in his intransigence. Yet at the same time no one is more attached than he to the permanence of these structures, so he holds on desperately with one hand to a Radical Party which he is destroying with the other.

The break in the UNEF is the more serious of the two because it represents the profound division among Frenchmen in a more real and more exact fashion. When no political or electoral interest brings them together—which is to say, when they meet over issues that are outside of party concerns—they are forced into uncompromising positions. How does it happen then that the country is so calm? Except for demonstrations like that of last month at the Arch of Triumph—and it is true that such occasions are few—the basic forces in existence, fascist, democratic, or Communist are relatively inactive.

This calm is deceptive. For France at this moment is living through a sort of civil war, in Algeria. At the same time that it is a struggle against the nationalists, the war in Algeria is taking on more and more the aspect of a settling of accounts among the French. Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, director of the weekly *Express,* has taught us this in his recently published report, *Lieutenant in Algeria.* The fascist organizations of continental France are "infiltrating" the units fighting in Algeria with volunteers charged more with keeping an eye on the officers and the draftees of the army than with fighting the rebels. Sometimes their mission exceeds that of simple observation; Servan-Schreiber met one man who had been ordered, quite simply, to "liquidate" him. At the last moment the agent's courage failed him and the "network" behind him was discovered.

Among the Algerians, events are developing in the same fashion. It would be false to represent this country today as the theater of a simple operation, in which two adversaries are opposed, French on one side, Moslem nationalists on the other. At the same time that they are fighting the rebels, the French are tearing at each other. It is not a question only of the Communists, most of whom have put themselves at the service of the National Liberation Front. Among the French "colonialists" (and this means not only the wealthy and influential *colons*) and the French "liberals," an open fight is going on. The liberals have against them not only the greater part of the population, but the official services and the Resident Minister himself, although

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he is, in principle, a Socialist. While the Right press is free of restraint, a timid effort made by the liberals to maintain their newspaper, the *Espoir,* failed and publication has had to be suspended. Not only was the paper constantly being seized, but most of its editors have been put in prison or concentration camps.

So it is necessary to note that not only is no solution of the Algerian problem visible now but one seems to recede each day. There is a stupid intransigence on the part of the nationalist leaders, who are committing ignoble excesses and crimes. On the French side, there is a strong tendency pushing them to the same intransigence, and a few individuals who are also committing unpardonable excesses. Finally there is the fear which is perfectly sound, whether it is confessed or not, that the end of the struggle in Algeria will mean the transfer of part of that struggle to France herself. There is no solution which can satisfy the contradictory demands of the uncompromising, on the one side and on the other. Any concession—and there cannot be a solution without concessions—will be considered by the Right as treason. Once again the time for the settlement of accounts will have come. We may add this: the military men who for months have been waging in Algeria a war which cannot achieve its goals, perceiving that they are suffering for nothing, will for that reason nourish an understandable grudge against the regime. Traditionally of the Right, they will find that they possess ideas in common with the Fascist extremists, who will discover useful allies in them.

In such a situation, a government is forced to live in unreality, so to speak, because reality is too threatening to be faced. And it is thus, to return to the analysis which Raymond Aron has made of these circumstances, that has been created "this strange combination of vanity and of despair which we have been witnessing without a recess for twenty years. More and more, there is a difference in official pronouncements between what our statesmen think and what they say, between what they do and what, in the privacy of their own thoughts, they deem reasonable."

So it is that when a man entrusted with important responsibilities decides to say what he thinks and to act as he deems reasonable, he causes a scandal. When General de la Bollardière asked to be relieved of his command in Kabylia, he wrote a letter to Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber in which he said that the army was risking the loss of its traditions in carrying out operations employing methods not natural to it; the government reacted sharply and sentenced the scrupulous general

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to sixty days' fortress arrest. Yet only a few days before that a semi-official paper, the *Message des Forces Armées,* had asserted that officers fighting in Algeria, "of different backgrounds, with brilliant military records, had expressed their moral despair concerning certain procedures used in tracking down terrorism. . . . The moral elite of the officers," the publication continued, "feels repugnance at this task, which it knows to be as degrading as it is futile." These words, stronger and clearer than those written by General de la Bollardière and as significant as his gesture, nevertheless provoked no reaction, for the *Message des Forces Armées* is not read by the general public. But from the moment that public opinion was, for once, brought face to face with reality, not by a journalist, an intellectual, a political militant or a priest (all of whom fall into categories often set down as knowing little and judging badly), but by one of those who, having acted, afterwards passed judgment on his own action, the necessity for punishment arose.

But it happened that this necessity raised problems which those who had bowed to it had doubtless not perceived clearly in advance. By the simple fact of expressing an opinion, General de la Bollardière had indisputably violated not only the traditions of the army, but its code. Therefore he had to be disciplined. However, let us look backward a few years and compare this with another situation which resembles it not in the facts but in the legal principles behind it: that of the German generals who were condemned as war criminals, who were sentenced precisely because they had not dared to act as General de la Bollardière did. By associating herself with those condemnations, France therefore declared herself in favor of a radical modification of military discipline: she subscribed to the opinion that generals ought to think, not only about what they do, but also about what they are ordered to do. From that time on, the government had not only to give commands to its soldiers, but also to convince them of the morality of its commands; and once it had declared that some generals had to die because they had lacked scruples, how could it now punish others who had expressed theirs?

However it may in the end turn out, an act like that of General de la Bollardière, and the support and sympathy which it evoked from the public (and even, as is also known, in the army), is a profoundly satisfying sign of moral health. The French government felt this so strongly that after having imposed sixty days of fortress arrest on the culprit, it then promoted him—thus respecting at the same time the tradition which obliged it to condemn him and a sort of rectitude which

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induced it to respect a man who had acted in accordance with the dictates of his conscience.

Perhaps it will be thought that I have allowed myself to be overcome by an exaggerated pessimism or bitterness. If so, it is because nothing is so painful as to see one's country miss an attainable happiness by so narrow a margin. I have just crossed France, from south to north, returning from a vacation. This countryside bursting with riches, these cities where one sees—at last—more and more new building, these new dams which spring up each year, give an impression of plenty and of strength which cannot be false. Once more it appears that we lack nothing except the sort of imagination which will permit us to stand up to situations which we have not been able to foresee. Or is imagination the wrong word? Is not the only power which we lack that which will permit us to see things as they are? The day when Frenchmen awake from their dreams, when they put aside regret for a past of greatness, they will discover all about them the elements necessary to forge a renewed greatness. But there is still no one in sight whose voice sounds clearly enough to arouse them.

Jean Bloch-Michel

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FILM CHRONICLE

THE MOVIES AS A FINE ART

When I was in Paris in 1954, I was conducted through the Cinémathèque Francaise, evidently a converted mansion, which then housed a great exhibition of cinema history that began with the earliest photographic studies of motion. Apparently in working order were many "Neolithic"-looking gadgets, and I was told that here were gathered—actually with all the style of a display of Oceanic culture—the most precious and significant filmic documents possessed by Europe, particularly by Italy. Though they were handicapped by crowding, this very condition promoted the air of departed parlor-magic which the tortuous exhibit revived; frankly, I expressed my Surrealistic pleasure. Downstairs in the projection hall, I beheld two classic film curios dating from the second decade of this film-making century; their heroines were famed Italian beauties who persistently took fluid postures alternately smacking of pagan statues and the inmates of sanitariums in their less tranquil moments. The best acting I saw that evening was by a lady who, abused by the world and her lover, threw herself without ceremony on the floor of a café and gave a prodigiously prolonged exhibition of writhing. It was certainly, however polished, the agony of a fine art. But which fine art?

The cult of the movies is probably wider and more innately furious than many innocent movie-goers and readers of best-sellers (as well as insulated admirers of Picasso and Pollock) imagine. Right along with majestic retrospective shows of modern painters, the Museum of Modern Art—which includes a modest "cinémathèque" of its own—lately announced, without a quaver of self-consciousness, a retrospective of "The Films of Samuel Goldwyn," honoring a gentleman who may truly be said to have helped, in his way, to make Hollywood history, but who otherwise may be said to have meaningfully enriched the public domain only with malapropisms.

The clear fact about all locales and grades of film museums is that they belong to that category neatly and alertly labeled by André Malraux "The Museum Without Walls," which suggests itself as a univalent term for modern civilization. As a branch of Roman antiquity, the movie

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belles I saw at the Paris Cinémathèque properly mimicked the attitudes of statuary and properly evoked, *circa* 1911, the future of Futurism with its urgent graphs of the havoc wrought, and the patterns made, by machines. The movies, a "living" pictorial record of moral and physical dynamics, may pretend to historical status, and while they are notably void of vast theory, no doubt exists as to their vast space, the camera eye and its privileges being such that, potentially, no privacy is sacred to them, whether human or that of remote nebulae. The cult of the movies is based mostly, therefore, on their history not as an art but as a humanly directed technological instrument. They have contributed to telltale missiles more than to fine art.

As museums of natural history are steadily becoming more artistic, instead of remaining like monumental antique shops made from taxidermists' premises, so art museums are becoming, *de rigueur,* more naturalistic—with only "token" walls such as the four-sided movie screen has. After all, Hollywood, now a cult at the Museum of Modern Art, is more "natural history" than "art history." True, during the Museum's programs, one laughs and marvels at fashions in acting and dress, sometimes nostalgically or otherwise admiring them, but one does the same at the Museum of Natural History before fashions in protozoa, which can be fantastically funny. How serious, in one respect, life must have been, struggling up from the slime and the ooze! But having come all this distance, when we see it ingeniously portrayed and enlarged by immaculate forms of tinted glass in a museum, we marvel and laugh indiscriminately.

Psychopathologists may say we laugh too much, and the laughter may be more sinister than we realize if it somehow soars to the historical level, where Marx observed (with stinging persuasiveness) that when history repeats itself—as happens in the cult programs of film museums—what was once meant as tragic is apt to look farced. Of course, it is not that history has actually changed *within* the reel of antiquated film, except to deteriorate its clarity; it is that history has changed outside it, and the risible awe of seeing Sarah Bernhardt, acting Queen Elizabeth for the new art, prepare for a pratfall on a mountain of pillows and then duly land, has only to do with changes in stage fashions and the superior mechanics developed by acting, which now sustains a calisthenic grace it lacked in the last century. Everybody loves seeing Joan Crawford hoof the Charleston in a film of the '20s: she had—and still has—the know-how.

Yet the historical level of film art is like the historical level itself when considered as humanity's overall, persistent case: everything (but

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everything!) depends on the relative rightness of the gauge selected. The know-how of an art is never monolithic, but fraught with divisive and decisive subtleties that stay outside history; outside, that is, the mere technical progress of an art medium. If museums tell us anything, they tell us *this.*

The modern intelligence tends to overwhelm us, if it can, with "documentary evidence" of all kinds. But evidence of what? The rub is knowing the exact point one wishes to prove and what it is worth in a known scheme of values. Does the cult for the film art's documents (signified by the more or less mushrooming societies and clubs of the big cities) demonstrate only that the movies "have a past"?—are "respectable" like other fine arts? But everything in the world has a past! Yet time seems, going forward with Proustian virtuosity, to go backward simultaneously, and with disturbing élan. The major poems of Pound and Eliot are, outstandingly, résumés of aesthetic modes and religious fashions, and hence their paramount relevance to the Symbolist anthropology of Frazer's school. The *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* literally tend to be "museums without walls": culture as a pure, essentially timeless, spatial complex that may appear, like space in the film, a labyrinth of openness.

Maybe this "agorophobia" of the fine arts (ambivalently allied to that plain claustrophobia that sends hall-bedroom dwellers into movie palaces) is owing as much to the paranoia of the old—in pre-atomic and atomic days—as to the perennially expansive rebellion of the young. Minor conclaves of film cultists are apt to be voluntary concentration-camps of self-congratulatory nostalgics. Poets, truly, are not so sociable as film cultists, but the effective imaginative trends of modern literature (Marianne Moore's poems are like exquisitely arranged shelves of antique and modern bric-a-brac) plainly point to an Alexandrianism of the art ethos. If Joyce's *Ulysses* could be dubbed an intensive capitalization of a day's culture, every Hollywood studio is to some degree an Alexandria of technical devices and cultural fetishes working on speed-up daily schedules.

As Pound paradoxically emphasized, one must know "how to read" before one can enjoy the rich stores of a super-library. The *Cantos* at large are merely a more or less eloquent guide to a presumed Alexandrian library of twentieth-century culture. In such smart documentary exhibits as I saw fleetingly at the Cinémathèque Française, the collage-principle of display bears witness to a basic filmic device formulated best by Sergei Eisenstein: *montage.* This is simply the formal juxtaposi-

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tion of images which are not necessarily related in objective time and space but which, when placed with plastic symmetry together or sequentially on the screen, yield a specific feeling or idea. In this symbolism-tending optical device (with its mechanical relation to Surrealism) may be perceived, at once, the basic principle of the metaphor as well as those elaborate metaphoric constellations distinguishing *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*. One term for these constellations would be "cultural ellipses," for their object in both poems is to establish identity and congruence over large, shifting spans of time and space. The historical level of all fine arts is where Pound directs our gaze—on to the *high* level—and if film history as the evolution of a fine art had its encyclopedic "Pound," that is where he would direct our gaze: telescoping Méliès' primitive Paris studio with all the super-equipped playground-factories of Hollywood, Elstree, and Moscow.

Whether casual collage or calculated montage, the documentary method of museums is all right so long as one knows how to interpret it in correlation to internally specific aesthetic values; i.e., "how to read" what is on view. The Surrealists, for their part in film history, quickly perceived the extraordinary faculties of the film camera for magical effects, and hence there arrived the classic, small-cult repertory films, Dali-Bunuel's *Chien Andalou* and Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet*. The ever-growing and world-wide Experimental School has based itself four-square on these two films and, more recently, on Cocteau's Myth films. Well may the clever Cocteau, with subtle French directness and simplicity, have perceived that the straightest line between the film studio and the Museum Without Walls was precisely the "film magic" implied in the high legerdemain of classical myths. Orpheus' legend, in this sense, was a "natural" for Cocteau. The great disparity of aim between the more orthodox Surrealist line in *Chien Andalou* and that in *The Blood of a Poet* was that, in the latter, the creator had in mind an "Alexandrian" or capitalizing exploitation of the aesthetic experience itself: the artist copiously in relation to his "magic" as if contemplating the world in his own navel.

Rather than straightforward Surrealism, Cocteau's art here was a fantastic one, utilizing neo-classic symbolism as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* had utilized neo-medieval symbolism (remember that *Dr. Caligari's* story turns out to be an asylum inmate's hallucination). *The Blood of a Poet* is simply a montage of fantastic image-sequences in the service of a perfectly reasonable and completely stated idea. Cocteau was wise enough to know that the artist's magic is no mere private matter and that the explicit idea of a world "navel" existed in antiquity;

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if this navel was geographically identified, as antiquity identified it, it still symbolized the center of the world as the artist presumably symbolizes the center of the corpus of the human imagination. In the temple (or "museum") of art, the artist ritually (i.e., symbolically) commits suicide as an individual only to be automatically reborn as an "Orpheus," the public laureate who expresses the sensibility of a great aesthetic collective. Of all arts, the movies are assumed—or at least hoped—to express the sensibility of a "great aesthetic collective": the "great," of course, defining *quantity* rather than *quality*. Cocteau's last Myth film, *Orpheus,* super-telescoped the chamber drama of his earlier, "experimental" *Blood of a Poet* by tracing, as it were, his history as an avant-garde artist who was to become a member of the French Academy. At last, he might enter the Museum by the front, rather than the back, door—and this was what he did. The irony remains that the Museum has come to have only illusive walls; indeed, as such, it parallels *The Blood of a Poet's* last scene when the poet's Muse, an armless statue, solemnly proceeds out of the art salon, where he has shot himself, into the indefinably open space of the stars—the "stars," one might add, of the movies as well as of the universe!

It would be a fatal mistake to suppose that any actual museum, however inhibitively physical its walls, represents a highly selective process by which the vulgar and the pretentious have been adequately eliminated. One obstacle to filmic selectiveness is, of course, national pride and another is sectarian, or cult, pride. Independent hope for the film as a fine art lies mainly in what the term, Experimental, implies in the total cultural context: the conscious resort to basic studio and laboratory methods rather than conscious emulation of the broad, and quickly academicized, formulas achieved by the movies at their commercial best. So little is really artful in the "open space" of the cinema heavens, so much is merely chameleon! As widely acknowledged as this is by the cultivated public, even film museums fail to provide, with critical hint or selective example, vital and coherent standards by which to judge the merits of what they find worth preserving.

Maybe a museum (like a monastery) is a place in which to wander and muse rather than (like a university) to learn and judge. If that were quite true, there would be no quarrel as to whether the young, young movies deserve being rated as a fine art. But, in the first place, they have entered flexible museum walls without being taught as a fine art at colleges, which makes them a singular, not to say also embarrassing, case among the arts. In some colleges, their history or their

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technique may be taught, yet that is hardly enough to rank them with music or painting, which have their own departments and their own schools. The movies have their "scholars," even (Heaven knows!) their "critics"—they have yet to create a recognized "school" of their own. They simply don't constitute a major academic subject even though they have imitated not only statues, but all the arts, for a very long time. There is no art, in fact, they have neglected to assimilate and ended, inevitably, by contaminating. To be a true art, the movies must not only be "fine," they must be "great." Wrong in method, Hollywood is right in aim. But for greatness, no "montage" of documents, however major, will do; there must be major vision.

Characteristically post-facto thinkers never understand why the movies still have to *prove* themselves a fine art. These reasoners don't mean that Hollywood's own Academy is enough or that the movies are really an extension of Broadway's tacit institution, the Theater, but are like those who use the ontological argument for God's existence. If it were a question of "the movies" as an advanced art of the nickelodeon! —but it is, they think, simply a matter of the Motion Picture as classifiable with Painting or Sculpture! Mainly, this is to rely on an insidious concept of antiquated date: the movies as a sort of Painting and/or Sculpture in motion. In brief, it is to assume Richard Wagner's grand synthesis of the arts transported to the film studios and ipso facto an accomplished fact (musical score by so-and-so). But the fact that Wagner's reputedly "filmic" stage directions are followed today, at Bayreuth, by the projection of film during his operas, does not supply the necessary proof. Wagner still stands or falls on his music as the movies must stand or fall on their vision. Abstract formal values *can* be discerned consistently in the best movies of the past—*Dr. Caligari, Potemkin, Broken Blossoms*—but the worth of these "silent" films will remain relatively superficial till the art can develop an independent imagination which builds supremely important themes basically in terms of still and moving photography. Borrowing—as with such "literary epics" as *War and Peace*—is not enough. The "original script" must not be an adaptation but a creation that starts with nothing in the mind's eye but what Tolstoy started with; that is, a view of life *as life,* not as a "museum without," or with, "walls."

Parker Tyler

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A COMMUNICATION

A GOOD WORD FOR ENGLAND

Mr. Martin Green's "Thoughts About Two Homes From Abroad" (PR, Spring 1957) seems to me both perceptive and challenging, but to need some qualification here and there.

I take Mr. Green's general feeling to be that, although things in both England and America are pretty bad at the moment, America is, on the whole, a land of greater promise for the future. Writing as an Englishman with some experience of America, I cannot, frankly, agree.

True, America is much less stuffy than England. There is less formality here, and less fuss about social conventions: no one cares how you hold your knife and fork or even whether you use them at all, and if you want to take a half-eaten steak home for the dog—why, nobody minds about that either. It is true that there is great pressure making for competitive acquisitiveness and social conformity, but the American class structure is somehow less divisive (because less sure of itself?), as it is certainly more fluid, than the surviving English class structure. And I am happy to share, too, much of Mr. Green's enthusiasm for the American university teacher: liberal, cultured, hard-working, more aware of the world outside the university than his European counterpart, and less inclined than he to preciosity, he seems to me to be, at his best, a very special and very valuable kind of person. It is true that most of these teachers seem to have learned the lesson of political caution only too well: there are very few now who will take an open stand on any really controversial issue, although it is just this kind of example that their students most need and, I believe, would most readily respond to. But if there is hope in the American future, it may well be, as Mr. Green suggests, with the young university teachers.

However, I do not choose to see England as so irrevocably doomed. On the whole, of course, Mr. Green is right: the national life there has gone flat and dull, the more sensitive minds are fighting against rather than with the larger movements of social and technological change, and no one has much sense of direction or of purpose. Everyone

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agrees that "something has gone wrong," but no one seems to have gone much further than that in the analysis of possible causes and cures. One important thing that has happened, of course, is that the social and political ideals to which the lively minds of the '30s were dedicated have now either been realized or been shattered. The '30s were—or seem in retrospect to have been—exciting years, in England as in America. There was so much that needed to be done, and such endless possibility of debate on how best to do it. Not only was there the social and economic mess of the depression to be cleared up and its recurrence prevented, but one had to make up one's mind about Communism (then a tenable ideal), and take sides on such political questions as the Spanish Civil War and the Munich Crisis of 1938.

Since the Second World War (in itself, to say the least, an unutterably discouraging event) all this has changed. In international politics Communism has been thoroughly discredited, and the world has settled into the slow attrition of the Cold War (which it is hard to feel passionate about, and almost impossible to disagree with your neighbor about). While the Labour Party was in power, from 1945 to 1951, the framework of the Welfare State was erected and largely filled in. And it has clearly come to stay: although the Conservatives, in the name of economy, have recently reduced some of the benefits which the Welfare State provides, they have made no real attempt to question its basic philosophy. In England today something like social (or, at any rate, economic) justice has been achieved; at least, a great step has been taken toward it. The goals toward which English reformers worked for over a century have now been more or less reached, and, at a time of considerable prosperity (however precariously based that prosperity may sometimes appear to be), there is as yet no general agreement as to what the next step forward should be—indeed, there are not even many ideas about this, or much feeling that any more steps forward are needed just now. Most people seem comfortable enough as they are, so long as their wages keep up with the rising cost of living. And so one begins to appreciate the force of Jimmy Porter's cry in *Look Back in Anger* (a recently successful play which has a great deal of the current mood in it) that there aren't any good causes to die for these days.

I am wondering, however, whether English life is *quite* as sterile as Mr. Green imagines and, in particular, whether the cult of the gentleman is quite what he takes it to be. He tells us that the English gentleman, so long a figure of fun, is still to be found in the embassies abroad and (though here "the absurdities are muted") in the British

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Council, and continues: "At home—in the Arts Council, the B.B.C., the stage, the universities, the professions—there is no radical difference, once the members stop being professional and become merely educated citizens. They are all gentlemen." In fact, the gentlemen now constitute "a social class bound together by a community of tastes and habits in everything from religion to humor. . . . There is a certain territory of mind which everybody has in common, where they all follow certain paths and honor certain mountains."

This last remark—about the cultural map which the educated Englishman carries with him and which tells him just where everything belongs and how important it is—is very perceptive: that is exactly it. But the rest of the analysis seems oversimplified. All Englishmen may have pretty much the same map, but they don't all choose to explore the same areas of it. There are very distinct specializations these days within the general field of "gentleman." Historically, even, there is not one tradition of the "English gentleman," but two: the urban tradition of the eighteenth century, which, if not genuinely "intellectual," at least stood for "taste" and for the things of the mind, and the rural tradition of the nineteenth century, which was emphatically conservative and anti-intellectual. And it seems to me to be the heirs of the second tradition who now speak in what Mr. Green identifies as the *Times* voice: the *Times* is their newspaper (the only possible newspaper for them), cricket and horses are their hobbies. If they read at all for pleasure it is always travel, biography, history—very rarely fiction, never poetry. Most of them are administrators, civil servants, professional men, Conservative Members of Parliament (altogether they represent a pretty solid Conservative vote). There are a few of them at the universities, too, especially at Oxford and Cambridge, but in general the university, B.B.C., British Council "gentlemen" (I hesitate to generalize at all about the Arts Council and the stage) are of quite a different type, with at least some pretensions to a serious interest in literature and the arts. They are more in the eighteenth-century tradition than in the nineteenth, and they are more likely to read the *Manchester Guardian* (a paper Mr. Green never mentions) than the *Times*. Their present weakness and lack of creative effectiveness, either socially or artistically, as a group seems to stem from excessive ennui—whether genuine or assumed one can never be quite sure. But at least there is a group here—fairly cohesive, its members more readily identifiable (and more ready to be identified) than those of any comparable group in America—which, re-invigorated, could prove capable of a positive contribution.

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I'm not very hopeful of this, however, except in so far as the group may become progressively infiltrated by the new, postwar generation of English writers, teachers, artists, even journalists and politicians, whom—apart from Kingsley Amis—Mr. Green almost completely ignores. Maybe, as Mr. Green suggests, this new generation has as yet nothing to put in place of the old traditions (which, in view of the longevity of those traditions, seems scarcely surprising), but at least it is feeling its way toward such a replacement. In novels by Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch and John Wain, in poems by Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings and Thom Gunn, in plays like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger,* one can discern at least the beginnings of a new and more hopeful movement—a movement toward honesty and away from hypocrisy, a reaction against political lies and social shams, a rejection of all cults of the gentleman. Theirs is thus, in a very real sense, a thoroughly subversive movement, and, at the moment, still violently so: but when things have settled down a little I have a feeling that the movement (it is scarcely organized or even conscious enough to deserve that title as yet) will find itself essentially in tune with the gentlest of writers, Mr. E. M. Forster. For Forster there is no such thing as public belief, no large society based on public values: the only worthwhile—indeed, the only possible—relationships are those between individuals or, at most, within a small group. I believe that it is toward ideas such as these that the new generation is moving, and that these ideas represent genuine positives, a place to start from.

The generally accepted view is that the old liberalism, with which Forster is usually identified, died through its own inadequacies at the time of the First World War. But Forster's central insistence on honesty and "naturalness" in human relationships ("Only connect"—the epigraph of *Howards End*) is surely not obsolete but has simply been lost sight of during the great intervening battles of political and social ideologies. In England now those battles have substantially ended. Perhaps the country will merely stagnate: and this is what it seems to have begun to do. But perhaps—and here is *my* hope for the future—England's postwar generation can produce out of their growing revolt against those aspects of English life which they, Mr. Green and I join in abhorring, a way of life that is genuinely liberal, honest, humane, sensitive—and democratic. It isn't, frankly, a big hope, but I believe it to be a bigger, and better-founded, hope than Mr. Green's.

Michael Millgate

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BOOKS

SNOPES REVISITED

THE TOWN. By William Faulkner. Random House. $3.75.

The Town, sequel to *The Hamlet* and the second part of a long-projected trilogy about the Snopes family, is the most interesting book William Faulkner has published in fifteen years. Though it falls short of being a success it manages to transcend many of the moral and rhetorical ineptitudes into which Faulkner's more recent work has fallen. It is not, like *Intruder in the Dust,* a novel with a broken back, half narrative, half Dixiecrat sociology. Its technical adventuresomeness does not, as it did in *Requiem for a Nun,* obscure the novel's main line of interest. Nor is its preoccupation with the largest moral issues so ponderous, so abstract or so personal that *The Town* is continually being surrendered, as *A Fable* was, to that monologue of musing and ranting about universals which turns up whenever Faulkner's dramatizing impulse wears thin. *The Town* revives the direct, dramatic mode of *As I Lay Dying*—the story is presented through the consciousness of several characters. It is remarkable for the extraordinary and intelligent self-awareness it contains, and for the definitive moral and social criticism it represents.

Beginning where *The Hamlet* leaves off, *The Town* covers approximately the next twenty years of the Snopes history, ending sometime in 1927. Its scene is Jefferson, its subject the impact of Flem and his family on Jefferson, and the reciprocal impact of Jefferson upon them. In Jefferson, Flem, the closest thing in American literature to a perpetual-motion machine of connivance and chicanery, parlays his interests with the same secret and preternatural genius for making money that enabled him to outman the "old pirate" of Frenchman's Bend, Will Varner. He eliminates his partner in the ownership of a restaurant; he invests in real estate; he becomes manager of the town power plant; he continues to lend money usuriously to the tenant farmers on whom "the entire cotton economy of the county was founded and supported," and becomes a power among them. Using his father-in-law's influence with impenetrable deviousness, he gets himself elected vice-president of one of Jefferson's two banks, finally becomes its president, a deacon

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in the Baptist church, an unshakeably respectable "solitary widower," and owner and master of "the old de Spain house which he had remodeled into an ante-bellum Southern mansion." It is a great American story of success, and a typical one. Inside of forty years, Flem, son of an outlawed, bushwhacking tenant farmer from the back hills—"Scratch?" says Gavin Stevens, "Scratch was euphemism indeed for where he started from"—has transformed himself into a rich and responsible citizen in a respectable old community, a defender of "civic jealousy and pride," a pillar of society.

But the rise of Flem Snopes, which Irving Howe has called "an inverted and sinister picaresque adventure," is only one of several stories which make up the novel's elaborate organization. Another and more continuous narrative concerns Eula, Flem's wife, and her affair with Manfred de Spain, saber-scarred veteran of the Spanish-American War, romantic, rakehell, former mayor of Jefferson, and after the death of Colonel Sartoris president of the bank. It is revealed in this book that Flem Snopes is impotent, and Eula, as we recall from *The Hamlet,* is a kind of bucolic Venus and Brünnhilde, a glimpse of whom is enough to send most men into nympholepsy. The affair of Eula and de Spain goes on for eighteen years within " a kind of outrageous morality of adultery . . . based on an unimpugnable fidelity"; they come together in a "simple unadulterated uninhibited immortal lust," one of those characteristically fateful and annihilating grand passions through which Faulkner has frequently expressed his sense of the limits of feeling, of emotions whose splendor of commitment and selflessness is inevitably accompanied by barrenness and isolation: de Spain is driven out of town and Eula shoots herself. Flem knows about the affair all along and effortlessly contrives to make it serve his monomaniacal ambition—the adultery of Eula and de Spain is in fact the wave on which Flem rides into respectable society. Faulkner's sense of the social immorality that allows Flem's schemes to succeed is particularly acute, and out of it emerges the extremely critical judgment on Jefferson life which the novel pronounces.

The only way Flem can hurt Eula is through her daughter Linda, who is ignorant of her mother's adultery and of the fact that Flem is not her father. It is her innocence (inexplicably, she loves Flem) that is to be protected at all costs from the truth and from the scandal and violence that a public exposure would create. For this reason Eula and de Spain are from the very beginning enlisted in Flem's intrigues, which would destroy them in any case. Eula in turn engages Gavin Stevens in the defense of her daughter and herself, and in

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effect of Flem too. Thus, Stevens, who has always thought of himself as the champion of the tradition opposing what Snopes stands for, becomes Flem's principal if unwilling ally. "Just say I represent Jefferson and so Flem Snopes is my burden too," he intones.

The third main subdivision of the narrative is composed of tales about the double dealings of Flem and other Snopeses who have drifted in his wake to Jefferson. In this respect *The Town* most closely resembles *The Hamlet,* which contains such consummately humorous stories as "Spotted Horses" and the horse-trading of Pat Stamper and Ab Snopes. *The Town* contains four such stories. Like "Spotted Horses," two of them—"Mule in the Yard" and "Centaur in Brass"—are reworkings of previously published material and are considerably improved by revision. They are longer, their style is more dense and their action more complete. "Mule in the Yard," I think, can now be read with "Spotted Horses" as one of the minor masterpieces of American literature. It tells about a certain enterprise of I. O. Snopes, who some ten years before the story's action begins bought mules for fifty dollars each, took them at night to a blind curve on the railroad where they were run down, and collected indemnity of sixty dollars a mule from the railroad company. His assistant in this business, a man named Hait, had managed to get himself killed one night along with a string of the mules. Hait's widow collected $8500 from the railroad's insurance company, and I. O. has been stewing for years because he never received what he calculated was his share of the money. One foggy day a mule of I. O.'s breaks into the widow Hait's tiny yard. Old Het, the peripatetic Negress from the poorhouse, is there; so are Mrs. Hait's cow and chickens, and so, soon, is I. O. A fantastic chase begins to flow around the house, and Faulkner's prose breaks forth with that unique, brilliant energy of perception which transforms the most chaotic and violent activity into fluid, comic grace.

"In the cellar, fore God!" old Het hollered. She didn't wait either. "Go round the other way and head him!" she said. And she said that when she and Mrs. Hait turned that corner, there was the mule with the flying halter once more seeming to float lightly onward on a cloud of chickens with which, since the chickens had been able to go under the house and so along the chord while the mule had to go around on the arc, it had once more coincided. When they turned the next corner, they were in the back yard again.

"Fore God!" Het hollered. "He fixing to misuse the cow!" She said it was like a tableau. The cow had come out of the shed into the middle of the back yard; it and the mule were now facing each other about a yard apart, motionless, with lowered heads and braced legs like two

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mismatched book-ends, and Snopes was half in and half out of the now-open cellar door on the coping of which the scuttle of ashes still sat. . . .

Passages like this remind us of one of Faulkner's essential sources of strength: the legacy of Mark Twain. Like Twain, Faulkner has learned to assimilate the folk culture of a part of the country to the literary tradition. He has been able to do so partly because of the nature of that culture, because it possessed in its actual life the complication of social and moral assumptions that a true folk culture always has and that makes it so accessible to traditional literary modes. But he could not have done it in the way he has without the precedent of Twain; it is difficult to conceive of Faulkner at his characteristic best without being reminded that Twain stands in the immediate background.

The other three stories, though not so memorable as "Mule in the Yard," are sustained with impressive intelligence and humor. In the last of them, for example, the extraordinary vignette with which the novel ends, Byron Snopes, who has embezzled a couple of thousand dollars from the bank and fled to Texas, ships four of his children by "a Jicarilla Apache squaw" to Flem. "They looked like snakes. Or maybe that's too strong too. Anyway, they didn't look like children; if there was one thing in the world they didn't look like it was children.'" Like Faulkner's idiots, these children are natural objects forced to inhabit a civilized world; the laws of their being are irrelevant to the conventions by which man lives, even such conventions as the Snopeses find it necessary to observe. Since their Snopesian inheritance has been enriched with Apache blood, they exist by a kind of essential destructiveness, a natural, inarticulate, unblinking aggressive appetite: they eat and they destroy. A five-hundred-dollar pedigreed Pekinese disappears inside of them; they almost perform an *auto da fé,* Apache style, with their cousin Clarence Snopes as victim; if they feel they are being imposed on "a switch knife with a six-inch blade" appears out of thin air. Flem packs them off to Frenchman's Bend, but since they destroy everything and everyone in sight there too, Flem, defender of civilization, is forced to ship them back to Texas and liberate himself and the town of the last of the ineducable Snopeses: he has run the others out or they have gotten rid of themselves. As they are about to be deported, Ratliff says: "Would either of you gentlemen like to go down with me and watch what they call the end of a erea, if that's what they call what I'm trying to say? The last and final end of Snopes out-and-out unvarnished behavior in Jefferson, if that's what I'm trying to say."

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If the reader feels that this doesn't sound quite like Ratliff, he has come upon one of the major issues in Faulkner's literary development. The Ratliff of *The Hamlet* is one of Faulkner's most admirable creations, a subtle, ironic sensibility, a disinterested intelligence through which the problems of a corrupt yet civilized society in the process of being infiltrated by Snopeses—not foreigners, but home-bred products of that corruption—are voiced. It is largely through Ratliff that *The Hamlet* achieves a poise and control unequaled by any other of Faulkner's works. He was to Faulkner what Marlow was to Conrad, and when we say that we again recognize the distinction of Faulkner's accomplishment in *The Hamlet*. Itinerant sewing-machine agent, carrier of news, repository of local history, Ratliff, who has known the Snopeses from boyhood and can even sympathize with their predicament, wages a long-drawn-out campaign against them. He represents the novelist's conviction that if civilization and sanity are to be preserved they must be fought for constantly, even if one has to fight with one hand tied behind his back, since to beat the Snopeses by their own methods would be to forfeit the values one wishes to defend. Ratliff appears in *The Town* in a more limited and constrained way. He is one of three characters who tell the story, and his part is the smallest, amounting to only 30 of the novel's 370 pages. This reduction of Ratliff's role is partly a result of the shift in time and place of the novel. We are to understand that he does not possess in Jefferson the decisive knowledge that he and no one else possessed in Frenchman's Bend.

Because of this, two other characters take over the bulk of the narration; Gavin Stevens and Charles Mallison are the Jeffersonians, and we are meant to see them as inheriting in some degree Ratliff's insight into the Snopes character and activity. Each of them is supposed to personify a successive generation with a particular awareness: Ratliff, born shortly after the Civil War; Stevens, Faulkner's own age, born near the end of the century; Mallison, Stevens' nephew, born around the time of the First World War. I say "supposed" because Faulkner's intention here is not fulfilled, is in fact overridden by the persistent failure of Gavin Stevens as character, intelligence and moralist: that part of the novel in which he is the dominant figure—the working out of the Flem-Eula-de Spain triangle—is absurdly sluggish, involuted and opaque. Although whenever he is juxtaposed to Ratliff, Stevens seems silly and in a sense impotent,[1] Faulkner is still too involved with him

1 Faulkner suggests that impotence only in the most literary and high-falutin manner: ". . . now only the afternoon remained: the interminable time until a few minutes after half past three filled with a thousand indecisions

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personally to admit that Stevens never was and never could be that fountainhead of moral enlightenment and of a gallant, embattled tradition which in the crisis of his culture and therefore of his art Faulkner needs to portray. In *The Town* Stevens is the same windbag he has always been, and his character continues to reveal what one can only call the coarseness and vulgarity of moral tone that have been so ruinous in Faulkner's more recent writing. "Harvard M.A. and a Ph. D. from Heidelberg and his hair beginning to turn white even at just twenty-five," Stevens is the most transparent of lay figures; he embodies an undisguised personal wish. It is he who goes along with what Leslie Fiedler has termed the frozen and ossified grandiloquence of Faulkner's later style—and it is he who wrote the speech Faulkner delivered at Stockholm.

In *The Town,* however, Stevens is put to an additional use. Since his is the mind and the rhetoric with which Faulkner feels the strongest affinity, it is largely through him that we get a glimpse of Ratliff—his ruminative, melodramatic consciousness is the complicated filter through which Ratliff's clear intellect is allowed to trickle. Mallison, a decent and perspicacious young man, affords an even further rarification of this device; he is less obfuscating than his uncle, but further removed from the events of the narrative, and often we reach Ratliff only through Mallison, who has gotten to him through Stevens. This extreme refinement in point of view is inherently undramatic and indicates how exiguous Faulkner's direct grasp on experience can become. Yet it indicates too how insistently he feels the necessity of re-establishing that grasp, and how strenuously he labors toward it.

At moments *The Town* does somehow get to Ratliff, and thus to Snopes, and whenever it does we seem to have come upon life and intelligence again, for in *The Town* Ratliff spends a good part of his time retelling the stories that made up *The Hamlet.* They are not, however, quite the same stories. The order of narration and even the facts are different. "Spotted Horses" is related for what must be the third or fourth time now, but as a compressed and anecdotal aside to another larger story. The story of Eula Varner and McCarron is retold with interesting variations. In the first version she gives up her virginity on the front porch after she and McCarron have returned from being

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which each fierce succeeding harassment would revise. . . . And I was in time but just in time." The echo of Prufrock is clear enough, and a case for its relevance might even be made. It is a comment, however, on Faulkner's sense of Stevens that he has to resort to literature itself to attain the very frailest impersonality or irony in his relation to him.

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ambushed by the country bucks, and after her father has set McCarron's broken arm. As Ratliff recounts the story in *The Town,* they fall upon each other "on the still-hot field of the triumph; right there on the ground in the middle of the dark because somebody had to hold that skeered horse, with the horse standing over them and her likely having to help hold him up too off of that broke arm." The murder of Houston by Mink Snopes is retold with the details of time and place slightly different from those in *The Hamlet.* In fact the whole treatment of time, of dating the events in the narrative, becomes a part of our response to the novel; on the evidence of both *The Hamlet* and *The Town* it is possible, for example, to locate "Spotted Horses" in 1891, in 1900, or in 1908.

Someone is bound to say that these repetitions are compulsive and a sign of Faulkner's waning invention; that the discrepancies of detail are a sign of his forgetfulness and carelessness as an artist; and that it is pedantry to pause over them or view them in other ways. This might be true, but for me these variations and recurrences reveal something worth noting about Faulkner and his art: he is moving back in the direction of his singular genius. The analogy I should like to make in this regard is to the post-Homeric fragments; in those almost entirely lost cyclic poems the stories of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were recreated and amplified with the same character of variation that one finds in *The Town* and in parts of Faulkner's other works. As one reads about them one gets a renewed sense of how one of the primal powers of literature is to raise mythology to the level of history, to treat the material of the imagination as if it were indistinguishable from the actuality it invades and transcribes. Faulkner is the only contemporary American writer who has a faculty for this; perhaps he is the only modern writer who has it at all. The stories he wrote over twenty-five years ago have become part of the given; he takes a past which he has created himself and deals with it as received reality. It is "out there," independent of his ministrations, waiting for him to record and recreate rather than invent. And as the degree of Faulkner's conviction about the historicity of his imagination seems positive, so, too, does the degree of his conviction about the authenticity and necessity of society, and the degree to which he seems able to represent concretely the deterioration in American life of those institutions and values which allow for the cultivation of the imagination and the spirit.

To have achieved this is to have achieved classical status. In *The Town,* however, we do not have the major achievement so much as we

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have the impulse to discover the condition in which that achievement is again possible. We find that impulse in Faulkner's effort to come at Ratliff and the Snopeses again, as we find the contradicting impulse in his continued attachment to the obscuring sensibility of Gavin Stevens. In his sense of the motives of Flem Snopes, for instance, Ratliff is sharply distinguished from Stevens. For Ratliff, Flem and the Snopeses are primarily *objects,* animals (rabbits, snakes, rats, ants are his metaphors for them), which are to be understood as phenomena of nature. Their intense spirituality, their passion and rapacity, are a direct animal response to the values of money and power which control society. Their spirituality is depraved just because their response to society, their instinctive understanding of power, is so untrammeled and precise, so unfettered by the hypocrisies of form and manner with which society disguises from itself the facts of its life. Some Snopeses, like Mink, the murderer, and Ab, the old man, are destroyed by their uncontrollable animality. Others, like Ike, the idiot, and like Eck, the good-natured fool, are destroyed because they aren't sufficiently endowed with the Snopes passion and shrewdness for survival. Still others, like Byron, like I. O.'s son Montgomery Ward, and like I. O. himself, expose their rapacity too nakedly and are driven out of society. One Snopes, Wallstreet Panic, even turns his passionate endowment against Snopesery, becomes a mortal enemy of Flem and dedicates himself to a fanatic honesty. Only Flem has made the perfect adjustment: he sees how much of the Snopes is hidden in almost everyone, in the men who possess money and power and in the men who do not, and it is upon their secret charge of resentment, avarice and aggressiveness that he works. He is successful because he understands society so completely and because he is willing to submit himself to the terms that it enjoins.

As Gavin Stevens contemplates him, however, Flem Snopes undergoes a transformation; he becomes part of that viscous ooze of rhetoric which flows from Stevens' mind like sap from a wounded tree. He ceases to be an object and becomes primarily a consciousness. Nothing could be more fatal to his integrity as a Snopes. He is "humanized" by Stevens; his motives are understood as almost unexceptionable—they become the motives which move Everyman. Stevens even begins to pity Flem when he considers his origins in underprivilege and his plight as cuckold. The Old Heidelbergian's rubric reads *nihil humanum alienum est,* and under his spell Flem and Eula become articulate and begin to speak in those orotund cadences with which Stevens—and Faulkner when he is Stevens—inflates all reality and makes everything in it a duplication of himself. Stevens is a true solipsist—here is, I think, one of the clear-

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est indications of the central imbalance in Faulkner's art—the kind of monster who effaces the actuality of others by imposing on them his own. By apologizing for or denying their animality, he not only misunderstands the Snopeses but dehumanizes them too. It is this misunderstanding and dehumanization that Ratliff tries to withstand, insisting that Flem's motives will not be understood if they are sociologized, that his desire for respectability is simply another form of his desire for power, that his success is a result of having beaten the Jeffersonians at their own game, a game few of them admit they play.

Out of this contention a third and broader understanding begins to take shape, through which we begin to make out the connections between the success of Flem, the impotence of Stevens, and the destruction of Eula and de Spain. Charles Mallison, educated by Ratliff and Stevens but uninvolved with the Snopeses, expresses it, and it is, it seems to me, one of the most explicit and critical statements Faulkner has made about his culture. It is a negative judgment, a judgment of failure upon a culture being devastated from within by its own values—values it has always had, even in its palmiest days when there were giants in the Southern earth. It is a judgment that is rigorous and self-denying:

> . . . ours a town established and decreed by people neither Catholics nor Protestants nor even atheists but incorrigible nonconformists, nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord; a nonconformism defended and preserved by descendants whose ancestors hadn't quitted home and security for a wilderness in which to find freedom of thought as they claimed and oh yes, believed, but to find freedom in which to be incorrigible and unreconstructible Baptists and Methodists; not to escape from tyranny as they claimed and believed, but to establish one.

There is no other living American novelist who can write with this authority, the authority of truth lived with for a lifetime. The tyranny which the passage describes and which the novel enacts generates both the fatal, desperate passions of the Eulas and de Spains, and the meanness of spirit against which they batter themselves and which finally, meanly, extirpates them as it tends to extirpate most impulses toward sensibility, vitality and style. It is utterly appropriate that a Snopes should come to power in this culture; he is no harbinger of something new and alien, something out of the North, or part of the "coastal spew of Europe," but the fulfillment of a tradition, its native, purified, stripped-down product. Once again Faulkner has cut the ground out from under his apologists, for this too, he is telling us, be-

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longs to the South, to an abiding and in the end perhaps dominating tradition.

Coming from someone as intensely implicated in the fate of his culture as Faulkner is, we must, I think, recognize again what a force for truth art can be, and how an artist who is faithful to his art is likely to be faithful to his intelligence and humanity as well. With all its imperfections, *The Town* represents a great novelist's dedication to those values—seriousness, wit, style—toward which his art aspires and by which it will again immortalize itself.

Steven Marcus

CRITICS OF IDEOLOGY

POLITICS AND THE NOVEL. By Irving Howe. Horizon Press. $3.50.

In the course of his essay on Dostoevsky in *Politics and the Novel,* Mr. Howe quotes the Russian critic Chernyshevsky as saying that "Literature in Russia [in the nineteenth century] constitutes almost the sum total of our intellectual life." Now there is a sense in which it can be said—it has been said often lately—that in America today it is literary criticism which constitutes, if not the sum total then a great deal of our intellectual life, providing at one end of the spectrum for the tidy explication of texts which serves to advance careers even as it keeps one's glance averted from the unmentionable crises we are living through, and, at the other, for refinements of ideological speculation in lieu of more actionable modes of political choice. Putative theologians write essays on, say, Nathanael West to limber up for their more philosophical labors, which, as likely as not, will turn out to have a distinctly "literary" cast—all rhetoric and no belief. Romantic writers with a taste for violence and guilty eroticism write "mythic" essays on the dark psychoanalytic corners of literature in place of a poetry for which they haven't the flair. And our distinguished liberals develop a fetishism for "the conditioned" which, far from its ostensible role in correcting literary taste, verges on an outright fear of experience. In criticism, it seems, everything is permitted: a religiosity without belief, the affectations of poetry without the vision, a politics without content.

One of the virtues of Mr. Howe's new book—this is one virtue among many—is that it is written with a full awareness of the ideological motives underlying our critical activity and does not seek to disguise its

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own ideological ambitions behind literary euphemisms. In *Politics and the Novel* he inquires into the means by which "the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology" have been absorbed into important fictional works. The bulk of his criticism is focused on novels by Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Turgenev, Hawthorne, and James, with shorter commentaries on Henry Adams, Malraux, Silone, and Orwell. Thus the ambiguous conjunctive of his title states at the outset the literary-ideological equation which he has assigned himself to explore. There is nothing either pedantic or forced in the resulting inquiry. Mr. Howe is not concerned to define a genre of "political novel," nor is he interested in judging literary works by political standards. "When I speak in the following pages of the political novel," he notes in his Introduction, "I have no ambition of setting up still another rigid category. I am concerned with perspectives of observation, not categories of classification."

The problem, then, is to explore these perspectives and still not violate the integrity of the literary imagination, for it is in such violations that an explicitly ideological criticism of literature has discredited itself over the past few decades—though it might be noted in passing that such violations have not been objected to so long as critics maintained the *appearance* of critical integrity (i.e., sticking to the text) and kept their ideological values underground. I am not sure that Mr. Howe does not set up a false expectation in this regard when he remarks in his Preface that his "interest was far less in literature as social evidence or testimony than in the literary problem of what happens to the novel when it is subjected to the pressures of politics and political ideology." To be sure, the *literary problem* of writing novels on political themes is discussed again and again, often brilliantly and in great detail, and with an admirable insight into the historical contingencies which modify the literary problem from one generation to another. Mr. Howe has an especially keen eye for the boundaries beyond which ideological pressures must be resisted within the literary work; some of his most acute *literary* criticism is concerned with novels which have been violated by their authors through an insufficient transformation of ideological obsessions into novelistic strategies. *Under Western Eyes, The Blithedale Romance, Virgin Soil, The Conquerors, Democracy*—these and other works receive a sensitive analysis which traces out the literary features in each work that have been disabled by ideological bias. (His discussion of *Darkness at Noon* ought to close that subject for good.) Still, the weight of Mr. Howe's book lies elsewhere, not exactly beyond the "literary" problem, yet by no means circumscribed by what is implied by that term.

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What we have in *Politics and the Novel* is not a series of critical "readings" of novels—there is nothing, for example, comparable to the brilliant chapter on *Winesburg, Ohio* in Mr. Howe's book on Anderson—but rather a collection of critical character sketches which explore with great subtlety the nuances of ideological commitment as they are represented in important novels. These critical sketches, taken together, constitute an impressive repertory of ideological roles which enjoy the advantage of having been subjected to all the complex criticism and moral fastidiousness of the novelistic imagination at its best. They conform rigorously to the novelists' *donnée*; at the same time they are animated by an urgent need to discover what it is that the serious novelistic mind can tell us about the meaning of commitment in our time. Thus, in a curious way, the novel as a sovereign form of cognition receives high tribute in the pages of Mr. Howe's book even as he slights the narrative structure of the works from which his critical materials are drawn. His conviction throughout is that the novel can speak to us on the subject of commitment as nothing else can, not for its political opinions or programs of action but for its concrete representation of emotion, will, and social fact as they modify—and are themselves modified by—the commitment to total political purposefulness.

One merit of this critical approach—this is another distinguishing virtue of the book—is that it does not indulge any facile oppositions between literature and ideology. It takes for granted their common interests as well as their disparate functions, and, rather than mobilize the literary mind as a weapon against ideology, its effort is to engage literary intelligence for the humanization of ideology. And to the extent that this criticism is successful, it furnishes a necessary corrective to the efforts of liberal critics to disavow ideological commitments in favor of cultural quietism (as if this were itself innocent of ideological maneuvering).

Yet, it is the scope of Mr. Howe's book that one finds disappointing. He disclaims any intention of writing a "definitive study," and no one is likely to mistake his work on that score. For all its achievements, it remains fragmentary and inconclusive, it remains somehow isolated from its own goals; and I think this isolation and fragmentation can be traced directly to its critical method and, beyond method, perhaps indirectly to the ideological dilemma of which this fragmentary quality is emblematic.

I have already remarked that Mr. Howe pays high tribute to the novel as a form of cognition; in this respect he has admirably absorbed the lessons of modern criticism and found a pertinent function for them. Yet in critical practice the tribute remains rather abstract, more often

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sensed at the level of assumption than seen above ground. Consider his essay on Dostoevsky. In an earlier essay he has been discussing *The Charterhouse of Parma,* and in turning to the Russian novelist his immediate concern is to establish the differences in tone and context, the special intensity and hardening of the "Eastern" intelligentsia confronted with the impasse of Czarist stagnation, which contribute so heavily to Dostoevsky's style and whole *modus operandi* as a novelist. He goes on to isolate the problems of Dostoevsky's particular generation, and provides a gloss on the obsessions and frustrations of the urban intellectuals, caught between the Slavophile mystique, the promise of socialism, and the terrifying inertia which colors the texture of all life and all ideas. He clarifies to some degree the ideological content of Dostoevsky's religiosity, relating it to the goals of political radicalism which the novelist ostensibly disavowed. In taking up *The Possessed,* Mr. Howe then has much to say about its literary character: its tone of buffoonery, its cast of pretenders, its provincial setting; and he writes at his best, I think, when he traces out the very meanings implicit in this selection of literary materials. In fact, by shuttling back and forth from historical materials to literary conceptions, Mr. Howe conveys very well the contours of Dostoevsky's literary personality, distinguishing it from the meaner vision of the ideologue. What follows is the series of character sketches—of Stavrogin, of Shatov and Kirillov, of Pyotr Verhovensky (together with a very knowledgable repudiation of easy correspondences between recent political movements and Verhovensky's ideas), and of Stepan Trofimovitch—which form the critical dénouement of the whole essay. As I have noted, these sketches conform rigorously to the novelistic materials, but in themselves, I feel, they fall short of conveying the peculiar power of Dostoevsky's mind; for that (need one add?) we must be admitted to the text, we must have direct access to some large and ramifying instance of concrete literary performance. Unlike the critic of a lyric poem, the critic of fiction must forfeit any claim of bringing before us the *whole* work he is discussing, except by indirection; but this places upon him what is, if anything, the more difficult task of bringing before the reader the most crucial contours of novelistic action, those moments which illuminate not an isolated character or motif but which embody a paradigm of the writer's whole conception. Now Mr. Howe is very good at focusing on the text in order to illuminate a given character or theme, but he nowhere takes up the challenge of this larger critical task. In writing about Stavrogin, for example, he alludes briefly to the fête in Chapters I and II of Part Three—that terrible vision of destruction which is the culmination of Dostoevsky's whole tropology of character and ideology. Everything

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impinges on this event; and everything in Mr. Howe's essay prepares us for an analysis of it. But the essay closes without giving it more than a passing glance.

It is here, I believe, that Mr. Howe's book bumps up against the unresolved problems of critical method vis-à-vis the novel. And since his critical investment in the cognitive power of the novel is larger then most critics', his failure to press on to the center of the problem is all the more frustrating.

There is another sense, too, in which Mr. Howe's method falls short of the goals which are implicit within his own book. In *Politics and the Novel* one finds an insufficient discussion of style as it relates to the novelist's capacity to act as a critic of ideology. The most notable exception is his essay on *1984,* in which he defends stylistic qualities as an organic embodiment of ideological vision. Orwell's book is a special case, to be sure; but the problem of style which is pressed to an extremity in *1984* is a central one nonetheless even for novelists working with more conventional materials; at least it is central to Mr. Howe's book. In *The Princess Casamassima,* for example, the affective texture of James's style is exactly suited to the progressive deterioration of Hyacinth Robinson's commitment. From the beginning we have taken this commitment more than a little on faith anyway, and as the novel unfolds it seems impossible to believe that the sovereignty of *any* ideological commitment could withstand the refinements of moral nuance which the Jamesian style lavishes upon the hero. Suppose for a moment that the unfolding drama were otherwise; that Hyacinth Robinson's story were to be a representation of the progressive numbing of emotion by the hardening of his commitment, by the systematic refusal to admit moral nuances as a category of feeling in the face of the political vocation. Such a tale would have made demands on James's style which could be shattering; he would have had to endow the vision of Hyacinth's ideology with a fierceness and absoluteness beyond anything attempted in the novel as it is written; even the freer-wheeling style of *The Bostonians,* one feels, would have been inadequate to the task. This is not, I hasten to add, a criticism of James's conception. He knew better than most writers precisely what his style was capable of. But that relief we feel when Hyacinth arrives in Paris for the first time, the full release of James's energies and affinities which we sense in his confronting a scene so congenial and intimate to his sensibility—this, I would suggest, should warn us, more than the small inaccuracies in his picture of the Anarchists in London, that there are dimensions of this subject before which James falters.

I do not want to suggest that Mr. Howe neglects this side of the

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critical task altogether. His discussion of Dostoevsky's buffoonery, of Stendhal's operatic postures, and particularly of the language of *The Bostonians,* exempt him from such strictures; and these are only a few of the many examples one could cite. But again and again we feel this reluctance to penetrate to the innermost literary matrix of the novels under discussion, until one wonders, finally, if this is not symptomatic of a reluctance to carry the criticism of ideology as far it will go—which is to say, as far the novelists themselves take it. As critics of ideology, the novelists (in the nineteenth century, anyway) probe more deeply than Mr. Howe, as I am sure he would readily admit. Can it be that his reluctance to follow all the way stems from a suspicion that a total immersion in their criticism would dampen his ambitions as a radical critic—that it might end in the very same cultural quietism which he condemns in his liberal colleagues? One is left with the uneasy impression that this may be so; that his energies as a radical critic may require some ultimate reticence.

Yet, for all one's misgivings on this score, Mr. Howe's book speaks to us with urgency and power. It brings alive once again, and makes vivid, the possibility of a literature directly addressed to the crisis of our time; it recalls literature to its most serious social tasks. In this sense, it resembles in many ways the documents of the great Russian publicists of the nineteenth century. It even partakes of some of their rudeness and belligerency, which may be no small virtue in an age of academic manners. If it does not succeed completely in its own objectives, it does nonetheless fasten our attention on the crucial problems, and it does this without the subterfuge and the doubletalk which have often made our criticism a solemn comedy of the irrelevant.

Hilton Kramer

BROKEN EGGS BUT NO OMELETS

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF NATHANAEL WEST. Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy. $5.00.

Nathanael West has long enjoyed a peculiar underground popularity—peculiar only because it has stayed underground so long. Even the publication of his two nearly-conventional novels in paperbacks has not materially improved his standing among the novelists of the '30s. Everyone is still sure that the typical novelists of the decade were Dos Passos, Farrell, and Steinbeck; West is an isolated figure

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whose connection with the '30s appears purely chronological. His chief function is to stand in perpetual need of being rediscovered. *The Literature of the American People* knows him not; to *The Literary History of the United States* he is the author of a "fantastic" book which caught the fancy of the French.

This new volume will at least have the effect of making West's admirers seem less like a secret squadron; no longer will there be any distinction in knowing how to come by a copy of his surrealist fantasy *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* or his Horatio Alger parody *A Cool Million*. But West's admirers will take a curiously Westian pleasure in noting that an inevitable residue of injustice still prevails. *The Complete Works* is incomplete, since it omits West's fugitive prose, including "Some Notes on Violence"; it is typographically deficient, in that it omits the line of American flags West used for asterisks near the end of *A Cool Million*; and the publisher, having made an odd choice of a preface, has neglected to mention its previous appearance, in almost identical form, in *Horizon* in 1948. Alan Ross has revised his essay mainly with an eye to toning down a few disparaging statements. For instance, *Balso Snell* is no longer West's one book which "has nothing to say"; instead, it is the only one "in which private despair is not related to a social condition." Ross covers the ground well enough, considering that he is working in a vacuum; his meager references to the passing of the Jazz Age mark his only recognition of West's environment—America of the '30s. He takes no note of the now abundant material on West's connections with the "social writers" of his time; or he takes note of it by cutting out this sentence from his *Horizon* text: "About West's private life little appears to be known." As might be expected, Ross's answers to the big question about West—his failure to win recognition—are entirely inadequate. First, we are told that the American audience had "a guilty conscience." (But that guilty conscience was continually being aired in the most characteristic fiction of West's time.) Second, the publisher of *Balso Snell* went out of business. (I can't believe anyone expected longevity from Contact Editions; perhaps Ross is thinking of Liveright, which published *Miss Lonelyhearts*. However, West's last novel was published by Random House; Mr. Cerf's success should therefore have made West a household word.) Third, "the shadow of an imminent war" distracted readers. (This same shadow did not prevent people from reading John Steinbeck and Margaret Mitchell.) The question remains—why were West's books ignored?

West failed to find an audience in his own time because he had an acute vision of irreducible evil—that evil which his reformist contemporaries considered unreal or curable. He lived in a world of broken

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eggs but no omelets. Far from being models for social reform, his key characters incline to pessimism, masochism, sadism, and skepticism toward the familiar attitudes, mottoes, and causes. Flight and death are the only feasible solutions to their problems. If Miss Lonelyhearts feels pity, it is accompanied by an awareness of guilt and inadequacy; he still stands outside the human scene: "Like a dead man, only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile." His editor, Shrike, ticks off the various escapes which might be possible: the simple life, the South Seas, hedonism, art, suicide, and drugs; the elimination of all these leaves only God, whose image haunts Miss Lonelyhearts. Another list turns up in *The Day of the Locust*: "What a perfect escape the return to the womb was. Better by far than Religion or Art or the South Sea Islands." Observe the omission of social revolution from both lists. Whatever West believed privately, the underground man of his novels could never be moved by any social creed.

The main symptoms of West's underground tendencies are violence, grotesquerie, xenophobia, and, most of all, a comic view of serious matters. His comic sense of life made him an artist, but it disqualified him as a "social novelist." He admired the left-wing writers and even joined them on the picket lines, but if he ever tried to write like them, he was overpowered by a sense of the ludicrous. Consequently, he seldom mentions the social movement that dominated the serious fiction of his time. He expressed his problem in a letter to Malcolm Cowley: "I'm a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the 'big things' without seeming to laugh or at least smile. . . . Take the 'mother' in Steinbeck's swell novel—I want to believe in her and yet inside myself I honestly can't." A socially-conscious writer who saw Ma Joad's silly side obviously had too fine a comic sense to do any preaching. And so, *Balso Snell* is more solipsistic than social; in *Miss Lonelyhearts,* the only Savior is Christ, not Marx. *A Cool Million* is conventionally regarded as West's one contribution to the class struggle; West satirizes native fascism, but, when he briefly represents a Communist propagandist, the humor is two-edged: "Laughing heartily, the two millionaires move along the street. In their way lie the four dead bodies and they almost trip over them. They exit cursing the street cleaning department for its negligence." Perhaps West thought he was burlesquing the fascist conception of Communist propaganda, but he is also commenting directly on the prolet-play. In his last book, *The Day of the Locust,* he wanted to describe a meeting of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, but his comic sense got the better of him and his account was "libelous." He substituted "a whore-house and a dirty film."

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West combined an encyclopedic knowledge of the misery of the '30s with a hyperactive sense of humor. He bears out the classic definition that associates comedy with a consciousness of superiority; West sees the grotesque, the maimed, the unfortunate, the failures, and, in spite of himself, he laughs. As early as *Balso Snell,* he writes: "I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is 'bitter,' I must laugh at the laugh. The ritual of feeling demands burlesque and, whether the burlesque is successful or not, a laugh. . . ." He is the unlucky man who giggles at a funeral; he is Beagle Darwin in *Balso Snell,* who hopes he will seem serious enough when he is told his mistress has killed herself. He is John Raskolnikov Gilson in the same book, who has enjoyed the thought of his mistress' surprise at her death. When serious situations occur in *Balso Snell,* West guiltily backs away and uses the dream form to reduce them to frivolity. Accordingly, the Dostoevskian Crime Journal has been written by a schoolboy bent on seducing his teacher and the story of the suicide is written by a husky schoolmarm who wants to revive the epistolary novel.

Comedy keeps breaking into *Miss Lonelyhearts,* although the advice-to-the-lovelorn columnist staggers under a heavy burden of other people's sorrow. His editor's shrill jests and his own misadventures on the road to martyrdom impair Miss Lonelyhearts' perfect anguish; we are told he is trying to get to a state of humility that is "below self-laughter." It requires no great leap of the imagination to see West himself striving vainly to overcome his own inability to respond properly to serious social issues, to do the "big things." This tension is the substance of the book and the source of its singularly authentic anguish.

With *A Cool Million,* the pendulum swings all the way back, and West fully indulges his comic talents. For once he unleashes his gift for cliché and his passion for violence—qualities which are curbed, masked, or censored in the other books. All the misfortunes which might overtake Miss Lonelyhearts' many correspondents here befall Lemuel Pitkin, a simpleton of invincible optimism. Everything happens to him, from scalping to political assassination. This time, we don't feel a thing. West's dead-pan extravagance anaesthetizes us, acting as a sort of laughing gas; the book is, in fact, very funny.

The Day of the Locust restores the tension between comedy and pathos. Here West assembles his most considerable menagerie of grotesques, all of them spiritual freaks who know just how appalling their reality is. They start back in horror from the mirror, and they escape—not to the South Seas, but into a variety of comic performances—as a movie star, as a song-and-dance man (doubling as dear old daddy), as

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a tough guy, as Gary Cooper, as a stout Confederate colonel. Surrounding them is the professional play-acting of Hollywood, where these dreams are manufactured. The veil is stripped away in a cinematic Waterloo which turns into a real disaster: "'*Sauve qui peut!*' they cried, or, rather, 'Scram!'" Waterloo looks forward to the riot with which the book ends, a riot led by the faceless thousands who have come to California to die. They are Miss Lonelyhearts' pathetic correspondents, the native fascists of *A Cool Million*; unlike the grotesques at the center of the novel, they cannot be pacified because they have no masks, no identities other than their own bleak selves. Once more, they are the tragic world invading the comic oasis of West's imagination.

West appalled his contemporaries—and, apparently, himself—because he saw comic and ugly things which were merely real and not significant. He could not confine himself to instructive social phenomena. He saw meaningless, unpremeditated violence. "In America violence is idiomatic," he wrote. "In America violence is daily." He saw and reflected what had best be called, clumsily if accurately, xenophobia. Foreigners are especially unpleasant, in West, in an admittedly unpleasant world—from the Jewish guide in *Balso Snell,* to the Italian who fathered Mrs. Doyle's bastard in *Miss Lonelyhearts,* to the crooked Jewish lawyer and the Chinese brothelkeeper in *A Cool Million,* to the tough Jewish bookie and the Mexican cockfighter of *The Day of the Locust.* In *A Cool Million,* we are told: "It is lamentable but a fact, nevertheless, that the inferior races greatly desire the women of their superiors." The principle is still in force in *The Day of the Locust.* Six men, each in his fashion, lust after a dazzling platinum blonde, Faye Greener; the one who is found in bed with her is, inevitably, the Mexican. And he's not even a proletarian! Clearly, West did not write improving literature. The other day, I heard a well-known critic speak on the buoyant, hopeful spirit of the '30s. I was not surprised that he ignored Nathanael West.

Henry Popkin

POWER AND BELIEF

MASS CULTURE. Edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. The Free Press. $6.50.

The title of course is a paradox, which the book amply justifies. The irony is that this critique of mass culture is a defense of ro-

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manticism. Indeed their connection is continually emphasized: the view that the industrial revolution, separating work and production from enjoyment, resulted in both the identification of art and life that pervades romanticism and the dissociation of art and life, the "boredom," "passivity," "depersonalization," and "loneliness" whose projective symbol is the "scientific" view of experience. Romanticism is "high" culture in the clinical sense of a disparity of manner and substance: the melancholy of Keats and the unctuousness of Wordsworth, for instance, and of course the voluntarism of Fichte & Company. It is a type of suffering, as critics have said, no doubt the only presentable or even sociable type. (If this phenomenon had a social equivalent, it would be called mass culture.) Form or style contains, perhaps, the inexpungeable suggestion of an integrated society; but the romantic writers find the dilemma of industrialism insoluble despite or perhaps in virtue of the multifariousness of their production. The separation of sensibility and technique tends to make art frivolous and factitious even, or mostly, at best. The paradox is contained in Mr. Van den Haag's opinion of art as "realistic" and morally "creative" as against the fantasy and stereotypes of popular culture. One may pause over the association of "realistic" and "creative"; but the idea that morals partake of the "creativity" of art, or of its "realism," or even of the peculiar insight of science, is precisely the depletion and corruption of modern sensibility. Morals concern exactly those exigencies where "creativity" is frivolous. But the real irony is the pleasure many of these writers take in the association of "high" art and "high," or bourgeois, society; although the fact that art as an institutional "form" requires an avant-garde keeps some of them from comprising a coterie. One is tempted to say that the epitaph of individualism, if it is half-hearted or gauche enough to need one, should be a volume like this.

It is an excellent work in that the selections are consistently intelligent. There are no less than forty-nine contributors, including Walt Whitman, de Tocqueville, and Ortega y Gasset on the general question; Edmund Wilson and George Orwell—both supplying exceptionally interesting essays—on detective fiction; two points of view on Mickey Spillane (!); a psychoanalytic approach by Brodbeck and White to Li'l Abner; exhaustive studies of certain aspects of the motion picture by Siegfried Kracauer, Wolfenstein and Leites, Larrabee and Riesman; and many bibliographies. But there is no inclusive account of any popular art. Indeed it is hard to suppose a textbook in this field. Perhaps it would be less interesting than this volume, which is often as diverting as its subject. It is more in the nature of a source book or a

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sampling of source material; in fact, it is miscellaneous even for an anthology.

In one of the essays, Gunther Anders argues, among much else, "Because the receiving sets speak in our place, they gradually . . . (transform) us into passive dependents. . . . Since the world comes to us only as an image, it is phantom-like; and we too are like phantoms." Henry Rabassiere replies, ". . . (knowing) our environment is being manufactured for us, TV-experienced people may tend to believe nothing, just as they have become immune to propaganda of other sorts." He is impatient with the "metaphysics" of Anders' position and with German intellectualism. (He might have added that this capacity of the German mind—or is it the bourgeois mind?—for unconscious self-parody is no doubt an aspect of its peculiar role in modern history.) Yet it is the inherent form of discourse, not only of moralizing but of thought. Industrialism, or materialism, accentuates, in this sense, for what it is worth, the idea of thought as a discipline.

Anders of course is right. Although Rabassiere's fear—"Far from living in a world of phantoms, we are facing the danger of complete disillusionment"—is mild compared with the metaphysics[1] of alienation, the two opinions are the same. Television is as good an expression as could be contrived for the unreality that symbolizes the separation of life from the principles that sustain and control it: a symbol such as no art form has attained or dare contemplate of the thing it conveys. But the disparity of power and belief is more than a potent symbol of our dependence and frustration: it is anxiety itself, or remorse, the difference between catharsis and escape. It is the hysterical, semi-conscious world of Kafka.

The theme of art as individualism, or of romanticism as culture, is doubtful not merely on doctrinal grounds, such as they may be; it is a breach of taste, like the distinction between culture and civilization[2] (older than Nietzsche, for the maturity of society is precisely its nostalgia, its taste for poetry, fantasy, irony, science: the pathos of utopia is that it is destitute not only of irony but of virtually everything else): the history of art suggests the opposite.

Martin Lebowitz

1 Compare this with the English view of "metaphysics" in poetry as a humorous breach of sense and judgment. Yet insight is inescapably a conceit, for conflict and meaning are identical. One is tempted to say that science is known as a discipline precisely because, in its dogmatic form, it is arbitrary and unrealistic, not to say incoherent: it is the academic or institutional misconception of knowledge.

2 White, in his discussion of the remarkable quality of German culture preceding the enfranchisement of Hitler, might have mentioned the prophetic irony of this distinction.

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VARIETY

THE MYSTERY OF PERSONALITY IN THE NOVEL

The novelist's boldest address to himself says: "I must master the most powerful sense of human life on earth, that of individual striving in a world clotted with both trouble and joy; I mean to commit myself to love and ambition and the frustrating of mortality."

The timorous wee clerk within replies: "Who, *you*?"

"Yes," says the novelist, "and don't interrupt. I will reflect the movement of men in society in order to give an example of the glory of desire."

The inner clerk, snuffling righteously before so much rhetoric, says: "Watch out! That's very difficult."

And so it is. And so ensues a struggle. Generally the clerk wins. Often the dialogue is never quite argued through. Occasionally, a few times in each generation, the novelist wins against his other self.

In the first case there is the sleek and pure pseudo-novelist, faking passion, faking life, the opportunist of problems, the Herman Wouks and Sloan Wilsons and Cameron Hawleys, with their deep affirmations for those who admire the editorials in *Life*. In the second case there is an uneasy, unfulfilled writer, often precious, satisfied with aspects and insights and partial comfort. And in the third case, when the novelist never abandons his deepest hopes, well, there is the possibility of a masterpiece. He gives us the stories for which we hunger, rich with people we love in mortal danger; his way of telling, his angle of vision, his perspective—this is what we mean by style—gives us the judgment married to perception which defines both the whole man and the artist. Sensitive and brave at the same time—what a monster!—he joins plot and perspective in a way that finally, without exhortation, suggests a vision of the good life.

This is the critical maximum

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which no individual can reach.

But although it is more pleasant to talk of success, I would like first to name some of the ways by which novelists evade the possibilities of their art. They construct a mannered style of arbitrary perspectives, with the intention that neither they nor their readers will be obliged to venture into the huge mystery of personality. The aim is simple: If you restrict your world, then the world is reduced in size and manageable. Hide what is difficult; trim what does not fit; make it neat. The great novelist is committed to a world without horizons, manifested first of all by a large and lyric sense for his heroes. The mediocre or tertiary writer limits and limits and limits, and so we have, sometimes overlapping, the following contemporary types:

The Forthright Brutes: Ernest Hemingway and imitators. They are bewitched boys, newly discovering verbs and nouns, physical sensation, zip-pow-wham of weather, drink, sex, war, bulls. They are too scared of what goes on inside an intelligence, inside a memory, inside a group of people to be able to face these matters except by smashing physical symbols like fists across the page. Sometimes they have sensitive nerves in their fists, but the nerve endings are stunned before making contact with the complex congeries of will and desire within.

Hemingway's resolution of the necessary tension of conception in fiction can be examined in the light of the traditional philosophical concept of Universals and Particulars. In one tradition "reality" is defined by abstract forms outside time, and the specific ever-changing events of our world are flickering shadows through fire on the wall of the cave, imperfect imitations of the ideal forms. In the other tradition, it is these particular events which are "real," and general statements are inaccurate, merely useful summaries of the only knowable reality—the fact in the here and now. The terms "Idealism" and "Materialism" are approximate, somewhat misleading labels for these opposing world views.

The novel as a form is obviously empirical, working toward whatever large statements it has to offer about men in society, love, death, ambition, and so on, through specific instances of *a* man, *a* love, *a* death, *an* ambition, a specific society in a specific time and place. Not merely in general approach, but in method also the novelist tends to be empirical. He does not say, "She was beautiful." He describes a particular lovely creature with all her lovely attachments and gadgets, and then leaves us with one of the formal summaries which are part of the reader's active participation in a fiction: "Wow! Beautiful!" The novelist seeks what T. S. Eliot has called, in a famous phrase, the

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"objective correlative" of emotion.

This objectifying in Hemingway goes very far. It is as if he were a too-literal student of some early physical scientist, overskeptical about what he can learn. The abstention from analysis, deduction, conjecture, the bold hunch—these risks which are taken by the great scientist, too—in favor of a minute noting of symptoms, has a certain animal simplicity, grace, and power. But even the most graceful and powerful bull hangs from a very small head, which he uses mainly for battering, and little of what one bull learns needs to be passed on to another. He has opted for a pathetic lowering of the eyes, a doomed charge, a sword in the heart, and an occasional chance to gore before thumping in the dust with his life running out. El pobre toro! His head admits not enough to understanding.

A passion for objectifying emotion through physical sensation and act spins off to mania in the lesser work of Hemingway and in his fleas. The details become more and more ritual; the general emotion and sense which is supposed to emerge from the details has to be supplied entirely by the reader. In its own way, this is a highly 'literary' manner, depending on knowledge of other stories, other stages in the life of the maestro, rather than on the work at hand itself: "It was hot. He took a cigarette. It was very hot. He took a drink. He went upstairs. Christ, it was hot."

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This type of minimal statement in Hemingway goes very far toward forgetting that thoughts, fantasies, memories, projects, the constant inner monologue and the unspoken conversations among people are also facts in the world, facts of being human. That we think defines our humanity. We are remembering, reasoning, political creatures, constantly responding to others and constantly willing ourselves into relation with others. Eliminate these actions in the guise of objective reporting and the writer eliminates the properly human, just as at the opposite extreme, in the precious and private writer, he eliminates social meaning by signifying nothing but his own obsession. The force of an obsession cannot be communicated; the obsessed person clings to his loneliness. Hemingway's compulsion toward objectivity links him with the obsessively subjective writer: they both fail to give us sufficient criteria for judgment, sufficient material for a full participation in the life of large human beings. They bind their projections of men in action to limited conceptions of the possibilities of being human.

Obviously, however, Hemingway has found an adequate stance for expressing the sadness of the basically uncommunicative soul and for giving glory to its instants of lonely courage. When he depicts the isolated man, he knows whereof he speaks and the simplistic prose manner which he derives from Gertrude Stein serves him well. (He was a nice boy, a good pupil, she notes maliciously.) He describes a static condition, not an act of becoming. His "moments of truth" are plateaus. The consequence of revelation is a fortified stoic acceptance of mortality. He gives us a partial truth about the human condition.

Why then does so much of his work make us feel like a rainy Sunday afternoon? What depresses us finally is this vision of human possibility—one of violent compartmentalization, strict limits, and no growth possible. On the occasions when he seeks to express a sense of people coming meaningfully together, he falls into an embarrassing purple rhetoric, as in the sleeping-bag scenes of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or in the biography of the battered old love-hungry soldier in *Across the River and Into the Trees.* This is not to derogate his great achievement, the one which is responsible for his popularity and his enduring projection of an aspect of life in the twentieth century. From beginning to end, he has spun out a continuous moral romance about the lonely man striving for dignity, grace, and compassion within a world populated by real sharks and imaginary tender boys and girls.

The Cataloguers: John O'Hara is a good example. They observe. They make the discovery of the

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trivial—it is *most* important; in fact, even the important is merely trivial; the trivial tells us all we need to know. They soothe us with sociology. They lay us to rest with details of tailoring and brand names. Their predominant cast of mind is a sentimental passivity toward the dead weight of facts, which are seen quantitatively, and the contents of a closet are given the same loyal inventory as the two-headed contents of a bed.

The Outer-Essence Girls: Truman Capote and the chattering poets of decoration. A paragraph is a hammock in which words copulate prettily. Society is a meeting of birds on the wing. Put more formally, they do what bad poets do: They use words as if they are things and not signs representing acts and things. They drop the object of narrative prose, which is to make sense about human action, and replace it with a prettifying function. They are interior decorators for sentences. We can't all be William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, or even Carson McCullers, but each and every one of us can aspire to be Speed Lamkin.

The Daintily Involved Observers of Aspects: This is the *New Yorker* fashion, although its best writers, such as John Cheever and Robert Coates, do something more. It is a variety of corporate prose less solemn-chuckly than the *Time-Life* product, but no more able to bear the full weight of experience. The *New Yorker* stylists are marvelously shy about the world. They blush before experience, but have learned graceful ways toward it, with shrewd notings of intonation and the vagaries of expression. Parts stand for wholes, although there seems to be a law of expression—the smaller the part, the larger the hole. Finally summoning up their courage before fleeing, these writers offer a pox on life in the last paragraph.

The Common-Style Fellas: Herman Wouk proudly claims to write "the common style." This cottony diction, also worked with varying degrees of efficiency by Sloan Wilson and Cameron Hawley, is the great current success. These people are the just-plain-Bills of literature, producing an upper-middle-class soap opera for the readers of Luce magazines and subscribers to the Book-of-the-Month Club's service. They love what-is, whether it be the Navy, the suburb, or the corporation, and come forward to swear their allegiance without quaver or quibble. There may be some touch of

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nonsense in the process, for the flesh is weak, but they rinse and bleach it all for us in the end.

It is the latter, the "common style," which enjoys the greatest success today. By the phrase "common style" is meant uninvolved, unambitious, "traditional" English diction, without excesses of feeling or rhetoric, suitable to describing the lives of people who want nothing to change, nothing to stop, just let's all pull together, hup-two-three, on to America's last frontier—Adjustment. Those who write the common style show us how to avoid adventure, giving us just enough of it along the way to keep us titillated. It is a manner of withdrawal. They use the tricks of plot to replace action, the display of hysteria to justify emotions treated by Equinol, the questioning of moral assumptions in order to tell us that these questions can be avoided. The method consists in the *ejaculatio praecox* of drama. Clear out before we feel something! The result here too, of course, is a safe but jaded withdrawal from feeling, which is seen as dangerous. (Passion builds and renews only *after* we have submitted to it utterly.)

The artisans of the common style often, like all good engineers, borrow techniques. Particularly they have mastered the cataloguing skill; occasionally they seem for paragraphs at a time almost as delicate as the *New Yorker* stylists; more rarely they imitate a Hemingway growl or a Capote fruitiness. But they turn these methods to their own ends, and go plodding on through their scenarios for adjustment. Flat-footed sentence dogs flat-footed sentence; limp paragraph folds into limp paragraph; the rhythm of phrase prepares us for the dénouement, which is a calculated marriage, a comfortable job, a saving of the company.

Form follows function.

The function is to assure us that the lowest common denominator of personality and experience is all we need. The common-style artisans give us an ideal of comfortable conforming ways. The package is all wrapped up and ready to wear, in fact, as easy as old shoes.

The mysterious longing of individuals to create and renew is excised with an almost surgical brutality and precision—although funnily enough, the American reader can teach these writers much about that of which the novelist is supposed to have special knowledge. American readers are drink-

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ers and sometimes addicts; Americans love jazz and fast driving and secluded corners; with all the itch to conform, Americans are still trying to burst the bonds of isolation by various sorts of violent experiences, including art.

Why then do so many readers find comfort in the dry apotheosis of Marjorie Morningstar's frigidity? How can Sloan Wilson get away with a billion copies of his pettish smugness in the job, the house, the rich aunt, the old wartime affair "talked out" between husband and wife? The great novelists have always given us, before anything else, before all morality and sociology, a sense of the richness of possibility. Why do so many novelists fear the mystery of personality?

Well, first of all, they always have. Besides, life is hard enough without going out looking for challenges. In an impoverished time, palliated by plenty but worried all the same, there is a generalized loss of the sense for creative activity. Nothing more than anxiety inhibits the power to do, to make, to invent, to admit. When your belly is constricted by worry, oatmeal goes down most comfortably. Novelists are human beings more than they are anything else. The mystery of personality is a mystery: isolation, incomprehension, brusque flashes of lightning, danger, danger, danger. To enter into a dark place involves the risk of coming out where you won't see things as they were. In novels as in life, we cannot eliminate emotion utterly and remain human; but we can replace deep involvements by passing safely from the stage of titillation to that of being jaded without crossing through commitment. We live this way, we write these books, we read them in order to say: *I'm safe, I really am, and I'm pleased about it!* (We keep on renewing the experience because secretly we are not pleased.) Thus Sloan Wilson can declare that his novel expresses his sense for a world which has treated him "pretty well"—wars, bombs, a third of a nation watching Ed Sullivan, all of it. Better forget about adventuring, he means to say; better accept a stereotyped image of desire; better be attentive to the media and take the profit in subsidiary rights.

The novel at its best is a large perspective on life in society—large because the hero's doings are important and because the novel-

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ist is deeply concerned with the careers of his people. *Ulysses,* for example, has difficulties of manner, but is not in its conception hermetic. Leopold Bloom is a representative, poignant, and troubling instance of city-dwelling man; his fretting and wandering in Dublin bring to us the challenge and limitations of our own intelligence, ambition, and ability to love. James Joyce's personal voice here is many-focused, as true personality always is, not the pale self-contemplation, blank and onanistic, which the seventeen-year-old thinks of as the pursuit of himself; nor is it the cruelly partial view of the writer fleeing his largest intelligence. It is a lyric reverie *in the light of* the wide world of society.

What is that grit out of a unique individual which somehow provokes the novel of largest general significance? The nature of the writer's involvement with his material (which consists of all that he knows of life) suggests another clue. For complex psychological reasons, many novelists have been unavowed Platonists, philosophical idealists, possessed of a spectator theory of reality. That is, life has meaning as the shadows on Plato's cave have meaning—as flickering glimpses through fire of something beyond life, something perfect and unchanging and finally unknowable by men. Their world is a system deduced from unknown premises. *Unknown*—this paradox torments them. How can deductions be made without defined terms? Therefore they look for moral abstractions, categories, faiths, anything that can place them outside the tormenting flux of time and sensuality. Perhaps they become doctrinaire religionists or Marxists. They take their stand as viewers, as unwinders. What is the effect on their novels? Well, some of these writers are great ones, like Proust and Henry James, engaged in enterprises of passive integration in order to give some "symbolic" sense to the unruly factness of life. They shrink; still they cannot avoid rendering this dense, combative, time-ridden teeming. Despite their static position, Proust and James at their best project a moving image of desire.

But in anything less than a master, the type of self-absorption in

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moody fantasies is crippling. We may be hypnotized by it; we all have deep impulses to passivity before the fright of time; but an aspiration to perfection expressed as static clutching leads finally to paralysis. We stiffen; we are isolated. Platonism here parallels what the psychoanalysts call 'fixation'—a retreat to impossibly perfect and unchanging gratifications or frustrations. We sneeze, we wheeze, our bodies protest.

Let us now set the empirical novelist against the deductive one. "Love" is not an abstraction to be encompassed by definition: it is this Jack and Jane, that Bud and Joy—look and see! The novelist is *not* studying shadows for some ultimate reality beyond earth; he accepts that the shadows themselves give him all that he can know; in fact, that they are enough; in fact, they are not shadows—they are thick reality itself and a marvel to behold.

The man moving in consciousness and contemplation of his will —really conscious and watching, really moving and committed—is the personality capable of defining freedom for all of us. His is the will which, in type, reaches to the divine maximum, where God made something from nothing, the heavens and earth popping out of his pride in six days, not seven—on the seventh day He gloated. At a slightly less monstrous level, Balzac created *Père Goriot* in fifty-eight days, complete with Vautrin swarming over Rastignac's soul. Love, ambition, power under the sun of mortality! These are the issues; the great heroes of fiction meet their risks head-on, as we all must do, but too often we do it also faces down.

The novelist must reach for the grown-up, risking, athletic personality, surely must in some way be this person, in order to find a hero who gives the sense of men at their best on earth: and catch him finally where his great gifts do not suffice: this is tragedy. American life is rich in suggestions of tragic themes: The man in politics is cracked by his ambition—but really involved, not floating above politics; the man in business fails against the fierce appetite of the devouring business world—but really struggling and pretty fierce himself while not mistaking the business world for the whole of life; the lover is lost by love, as it is perhaps still possible to be, but by a love which is health and de-

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sire for a woman worth desiring and defeated by the natural strangeness of human beings. It would not be stretching the essential definition of tragedy to show the possibilities of individual triumph in all these struggles.

We should expect the fragmentation of self in the modern novel, just as we expect it in the man bound to a factory or office, within a social structure which cannot use the largest capacities of millions of individuals. Writers are responsive people: the complexities of being an American in 1957 are enough to tempt all of us to turn to partial, limited, maybe soothing half-views. What a dangerous thing to be all present and awake before the front page of the daily newspaper!

Can some novelists stand up against their confusion and fright?

Yes, and even with courage, humor, and a will to do good work. Without naming specific writers, I suggest that the contemporary American novel is still the best place to look for instances of lives which seek to be whole and unafraid. Confidence and freedom of style are good signs of a writer's taking the chance. A style which attempts to use all a writer knows to tell all he can imagine involves a moral stance in favor of intelligence and liberty and risk-taking. With their varying defects and capacities, such writers have this in common: they are individuals, not products; they are making a way, not accepting a road; they do not flinch before the mystery of personality, or when they do, they give signs of knowing that there is something vital left out. Their failures are peculiarly ungracious: they intend otherwise. They will try again next time.

At its best, the art of the novel tells us more than we can find out elsewhere about love and death. We commune together before a guiding image of the always unfulfilled possibilities of life on earth. We are therefore in continual need of the dangerous, destructive moralist which the great novelist is.

Herbert Gold

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CORRESPONDENCE

TV AND ACTUALITY

SIRS:

Miss Vivienne Koch made several interesting and valid points in her "Notes on TV" (PR, Spring 1957). As a spasmodic "viewer" for the past two years, I agree with her both about television's permanence and its fatal limitations as an "art" form. In many ways it seems like a revival of the art of the miniature, whether in the small medieval traveling theaters or in any other form of shrunken scale. Not only are attempts at the grandiose such as *Mayerling* sad failures, but the kind of passable, repertory acting that the Old Vic offered in *Romeo and Juliet,* good enough in the theater, suffers acutely from the close scrutiny of the camera. I was so mesmerized during that performance by the peculiar operations of Claire Bloom's mouth and jaw that I missed the play. Elocution on TV can pass only *as* elocution or the parody thereof. TV is merciless with average, large-scale effects meant for the open theater, for "projection" into the second balcony.

On the other hand, TV, by ruling out the kind of elaborate gimmickry and technical atmospherics that increasingly does duty in the Broadway theater for good writing and acting, keeps the human scale. It will probably always remain a parasite of the theater, as a form of amusement, but it also puts theater people on their mettle. When an artificial style, like that of the Redgrave production of *She Stoops to Conquer,* has been perfected by long practice and is the right style for the play, TV can faithfully put it across with considerable effect. And performers like Noel Coward, Maurice Chevalier and Victor Borge lose nothing whatever by the diminution and cold de-glamorizing of TV.

It's possible to blame much of the vacillation and blunderiig of TV on the times. As a plaything of big business, it is certainly one of the major opiates. Even the firing of such a dubious genius as Mr. Weaver of Lucky Strike fame has been something to regret, resulting in less Goldsmith and Shaw and more horrible cuteness of the *Peter Pan* and *Cinderella* variety.

I part company with Miss Koch on only one point—her definition of actuality. TV is essentially a retailer of actuality, like weekly journalism. It is by nature caustic, reductive, deflationary. You cannot work up the same enthusiasm for something that comes to you free that you can for something that requires money and effort. I think this applies equally to such great events as the Hungarian revolt and the sinking of the *Andrea Doria.* The finest moment I recall on TV was Mr. Welch's tearful denunciation of McCarthy and McCarthy's subsequent map-lecture on the threat of Communism in the United States—a piece of grotesquerie worthy of the greatest dramatist. This was actual enough, God wot, but essentially a masterpiece of deflation, of the reduction of actuality to a human scale. It made a hero of Mr. Welch and a fool of McCarthy to a degree that could not have been imagined beforehand. The fact that the recent labor hearings have not been televised shows that the forces of righteousness are as well aware as the forces of evil of the hidden dangers of the medium. What I mean is that TV cannot be relied on as a faithful transmitter of actuality in the absolute. It is only effective as a kind of reduction and dramatic commentary. Propaganda, technical blandishment and manipulation of any kind is even more obvious than usual on television. This is doubtless the main reason why TV can have only a very few great moments, but also why these moments tend to be unforeseen and accidental.

By the same token, TV can do something to "redeem" what has often been called in PR's pages *kitsch* or Popular Art. I'm sorry that Miss Koch doesn't seem to take to Jackie Gleason or TV comedy in general. Gleason now seems to be played out, but some of

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his sketches in the old days I found very funny; good old sentimental vulgar comedy of situation, much like what I imagine Harrigan and Hart used to offer to the magnificos of Tammany Hall. Gleason and Carney between them exhausted the possibilities of ritual jokes about poverty, fatness, tenement life, lodge meetings, mothers-in-law, etc. But the show sometimes had a seedy grandeur and verve. You can kill any discussion of such matters by dragging in the *Commedia dell'Arte;* but this is what TV comedy at its best really is—ritual situations, tightly limited extravagant acting, the fewest possible props, Mr. Ernie Kovacs and his "visual slapstick" notwithstanding. TV comedians obsolesce in very short order, or descend like Jack Benny, or Gracie Allen, to a comfortable level of mediocrity. But the financial rewards are so great, for even one or two seasons in the sun, that there is no cause for premature elegy.

In other words, I think the "actuality" that TV can sometimes capture is found as often in the field of "entertainment" as in the world at large. It has its own flickering, pouncing spasmodic life that can never be entirely controlled or predicted. How one could ever develop the "serious, responsible and pragmatic television criticism" that Miss Koch looks for I confess I can't imagine. Surely it must be as casual as the medium itself. That anybody at all has suffered himself to be harnessed to this apparatus as steadily as have Messrs. Crosby and Gould is cause for astonishment. The *New Yorker* tried it and gave it up. The theater itself is in far greater need of intelligent criticism. All the brains that TV can muster ought to be devoted to writing, directing and planning—or fighting censorship from inside. I for one would like to see it remain a parasite as long as it possibly can; a miniature art that depends for its life on far more vital models.

Cambridge, Mass. R. W. FLINT

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